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THAT TURBULENT TERM

"NOW THEN, LOOK WHERE YOU'RE GOING, CAN'T YOU?"

p. 19.

THAT TURBULENT TERM

BY

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"Peg Runs Away—to School," etc.

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THAT TURBULENT TERM

CHAPTER I

A CHAPTER OF CONFERENCES

THERE was scarcely time for Biddy to hang up her hat and find her towel before Maxime was bursting out with the whole story.

"Oh, Biddy!" she cried. "I just don't know what I should have done if you hadn't come back a few days before the others! I was just longing to talk about it—there's something most extraordinary happening—but, of course, no one says a word to me. I'm just in the Lower Fourth and nobody would *dream*——"

"Half a minute," said Biddy, lathering briskly. "What I want to know is, what on earth are you doing here, my child? I thought you were going to Velma Green's first and then on home to your auntie's, as usual."

"So I was, and I did," returned Maxime. "I say, you are splashing, Biddy! I went to Velma's and had a lovely time, but when I got to auntie's, Brenda, my little cousin, you know, had suddenly caught scarlet fever—and they wouldn't even let me go to the house. Auntie met me at the station and said she'd just wired to ask if I might go on

to school a fortnight early and they said yes. Of course, they were awfully sorry at home, and so was I, and so, I guess, was poor old Brenda!"

"So you've been here a week on your own!" exclaimed Biddy in horror. "Well, you're a nice sort of pal! Why didn't you let me know and come to our place? Hand me the towel, old thing."

"Well, I should have done," explained Maxime, "but I knew your father and mother were going away to Egypt, and you were coming back a week early, and I thought I should be frightfully in the way when they were packing."

Biddy's face emerged from the towel, shining and refreshed. She now directed the friction to her hands.

"Well, anyway, we'll make up for our sorrows now—we can manage to enjoy our little selves. But what do you mean by that, Max—that there's something extraordinary happening—where, when, and how?"

"Here, now, in this school," returned Maxime impressively. "It's been nothing but telegrams and conferences and things—and, of course, poor Miss Demsford has been ill for a week, and they are only just letting people see her to-day, and I'm certain sure it was the mystery, whatever it is, that made her ill. But come on down to the mistresses' sitting-room—I'm allowed to use that—and do, for goodness' sake, let's have a powwow before tea. I'm simply longing to talk it over with some one. Every one looks at me with a get-off-the-earth kind of expression, you know—'dear me,

here's that child again, what a nuisance, what shall we do with her'—and as for daring to ask any questions, why, it would be as much as my life is worth! I should be just snapped up and——"

"Here we are," broke in her friend, as they entered the mistresses' sitting-room and, with a delicious sense of luxury, sank into the low wicker chairs. "Now, my child, stop talking so much and say something. Begin at the beginning."

"Well," said Maxime, leaning forward eagerly, "it began a week ago. You know the flood came up all round here the same week that we broke up, and the dorm buildings were flooded out; they had an awful time. It had never been known like that before. The school was above water level, you know. Jane told me all about it the first night —Miss Aster was far too busy to bother about Matron-ing me, and Jane showed me where I was to sleep—it's Miss Baton's bedroom on the second floor, and you're to sleep there as well; it looks out over——"

"But what about the mystery?" interrupted Biddy. She knew her friend's methods. It was absolutely necessary to head Maxime off sometimes, or she never reached the point.

"Well, I haven't been able to get a word out of Jane about that—she says she doesn't know anything—it's all 'that secret' she hasn't heard a syllable, but I don't know. Anyhow, all the bedding has been airing in the dorm buildings, and it has all been cleaned out and everything. Fancy, Biddy! Jane says the water was three feet deep over the floor, and, oh! the awful mess it left behind it, and

—oh, Biddy, don't throw cushions at me, it interrupts my thread of thought! Where was I? Oh, yes! Well, all went merry as a bell, and then two men came and Miss Demsford took them to the dorm. I saw them because I was sitting at this window. Well, they were in ages, and when they came out and I saw Miss Demsford's face I nearly shrieked! She was as white as a sheet, and the men looked nice, but sort of sorry for her. Something had happened. She was a *different woman.* The iron had entered into her soul. She seemed——"

"Maxime," said Biddy firmly and threateningly, "*will* you——"

"Oh, all right," returned Maxime with resignation. "But it really all comes into the story. Well, Miss Demsford and Miss Aster Demsford were shut up all the afternoon in the study, and they scarcely touched their tea, for I saw Maud bringing it out again, and it was the same with dinner, Jane said. They hardly ate a thing, and when I passed I could hear them talk, talk, talk! And then all in a hurry they had Jem, the bootboy, in. He came dashing back through the hall, nearly knocked into me, and then he grinned and said he was sorry. But he showed me a whole sheaf of papers in his hand, and he said: 'I've got all these here telegrams to send off before office closes, so I've got to stir me stumps!' And the next morning Miss Demsford was ever so ill, and the doctor came flying, and they said it was getting so wet through in the flood time and now a nervous breakdown, too. And the doctor said she mustn't be worried about anything for some days, Jane said. And so there was

Miss Aster going about with an absolutely distracted face, and she sent to see if Miss Donovan, the Six A mistress, had got back to her cottage yet after the holidays, and she hadn't. You know how Miss Aster hates doing anything on her own, and there was Miss Demsford ill—mustn't be talked to. And all the time—this is the part which is so utterly extraordinary, Biddy—she had set the maids to clearing out the big dorm buildings and folding all the bedsteads up and stowing everything into the annex where some of the Third slept and where all the bathrooms are. And so you see, Biddy, this is the absolutely weird position a week before term opens—no Miss Demsford and not a single solitary bed ready for Conellan School girls to lay the soles of their heads ! "

Maxime had been longing to create a sensation, and she had certainly done so. Biddy's eyes had been growing wider and wider, and exclamations dropped from her eager lips as the story unfolded. Now she sat up straight in the low chair and regarded Maxime with startled eyes.

" Oh, Max, what does it mean ? No wonder you've been getting excited and worried. What *can* be the matter ! "

" Jane says Deborah West is coming back the day after to-morrow," went on Maxime, " because of some altered arrangements at home, but I don't suppose *she'll* tell us anything about it. Catch the head girl telling a Fourth Former. Anyone would think we were the outcasts of the earth just because——"

" Look, Maxime ! " Biddy sprang from her seat

and ran to the window. "There's Miss Donovan coming up the drive! She's come back now then, and she's hurried along at once to see Miss Demsford. They're going to have conferences and things. Oh dear! if only they'd let us hear even the weeniest bit!"

But the sound of the study door closing behind Miss Donovan a few minutes later only confirmed the view of the two worried occupants of the sitting-room that in this mysterious situation the Fourth Form actually was not going to be consulted at all.

Inside the study Miss Donovan, young, brisk and jolly, was shaking hands in some dismay with the Principal of Conellan.

"Why, Miss Demsford, how ill you look!" she exclaimed. "I am so sorry you've had such a trying time. I found your telegram and letter awaiting me when I returned to-day, and I hurried along at once."

"That was good of you," returned Miss Demsford, with what she endeavoured to make her usual firm, kindly smile. "However, I'm afraid there is nothing much to talk over. My sister and I sent out the notices to all the mistresses directly the verdict was given. Since then I have been too ill to face the situation at all until to-day. I fear there is nothing for it but to—to close the school."

The Principal busied herself with some papers upon the desk to hide the fact that the eyes Conellan girls knew only as keen and clear were full of tears. Miss Donovan, who was really fond of the Head,

was shocked to see how the worry and the week's illness had pulled her down.

"The dormitory buildings are absolutely condemned, then?" she said. "They are not to be used?"

"The official verdict and that of our own man agree," returned the Principal. "They say the buildings, although so old, would have stood many more years had it not been for the flood. That undermined the walls and gave the final touch. They are not safe to live in or use. All that can be allowed to remain is the fairly new annex, which, as you know, was built on to hold all the bathrooms for the dormitories, to get rid of the difficulty of installing them in the old building. There are, of course, only a few rooms there, in which I have had the furniture stored. The school buildings stand on higher ground and so were not touched. There has not been a flood like this for sixty years!"

Silence fell in the big study with its book-lined walls, and then Miss Donovan spoke in a low voice: "It seems terrible to think that Conellan School must be given up. Surely there must be some way out!"

Miss Demsford cleared her throat. "There is no possible accommodation for all the girls in the school buildings, you see, and in this neighbourhood no place where they could be boarded out. Mr. Herons, who advises us, says that the dormitory buildings could be pulled down and rebuilt before the beginning of the winter term. But then, of course"—the Principal's tone was bitter—"he might as well say in ten years' time, for one can

hardly expect the girls' parents to be content to keep their girls at home for the whole of the summer term. No, they will be forced to send them to another school—and they will hardly return to Conellan afterwards. And, besides, to tell you the truth, Miss Donovan, Conellan is finding its path hard just at present in the way of money. The insurance, I believe, will nearly cover the cost of rebuilding. By the end of the year we should be on our feet again if things were normal. But to lose the whole of our fees for one term "—Miss Demsford paused and bit her lip—" will be our death-blow. We cannot recover. No, the only course to take now is to write to all the parents and tell them that—that we shall be unable to reopen Conellan."

Miss Donovan, however, was looking before her with narrowed, considering eyes. " I have been working out an idea," she said. " I wonder what you will think of it. Why shouldn't the school sleep under canvas this summer ? You could hire tents, I've no doubt, in Forford. Luckily the annex with bathrooms, etc., is all right. The rebuilding could go on ready for the winter term, and a summer term under canvas would hurt no one when there were still the school buildings to work in as usual."

Miss Demsford glanced up quickly. The teaching at Conellan was broadminded and healthy, but the school had always stood for old traditions, and a change of any kind was viewed with suspicion. However, a gleam of interest lit up her face.

" That is not at all a bad idea. But supposing

we had a summer like the last! All rain! It would be impossible. Besides, I doubt if any parents would agree to it. Conellan has always been conservative and firm in its ways—an innovation like that—and then the mistresses—it would be difficult——"

However, the longer they discussed Miss Donovan's idea the more clearly the Principal of Conellan saw that it was the only chance of saving the old school which she and the girls loved.

At last, when Miss Donovan rose to go—for she lived in a country cottage some miles away with her mother—everything was settled.

"I will wire and write to the mistresses at once," said Miss Demsford. Already she looked steadier and happier, more like the traditional Head of Conellan. "I will also send out a letter to the parents. My sister will help me, and so also will Deborah. She is coming back to-morrow, and I should have no hesitation in trusting her with the whole plan. She is a very dependable girl, and will, I know, do her best to get things going in the new conditions. I am very grateful to you, Miss Donovan."

The third of the conferences so vital to the future of Conellan took place in the Sixth Form room a week later. Miss Aster Demsford and Miss Donovan were writing busily, while Deborah worked in a corner sorting out papers.

There were several letters in the Principal's hand as she entered, and Miss Donovan, looking up quickly, saw that her face was drawn.

"I am afraid fortune is not beaming upon us," she said, with a little forced smile. "You need not go, Deborah. This is from Miss Baton—I wondered why we had not heard. She is in Switzerland. A friend of hers has a school there and had always wanted her to go out, and directly she received my wire and letter she went straight over and took the post. Here is a letter from the mistress introduced by that agency. She would like very much to be at Conellan School, but she is afraid she could not undertake the work and discipline necessary if girls are sleeping under canvas. There are other applicants, but none of them with the qualifications I should require for mistresses at Conellan. Miss Baton makes the fifth of our teachers who have taken other posts since my wire and therefore cannot come, though they are quite upset about it. Miss Crowe and Miss Drinkwater are still at liberty, but feel they could not face the altered conditions. They are neither of them out-of-door people, you know. That leaves us only yourself, Miss Donovan, and you have always slept at the cottage with your mother because of her illness, and Miss Marret. She is quite willing to try it, but I know how terribly she suffers from rheumatism, and I would not ask her, on reflection, to sleep out of doors. It is the same with my sister, though as Matron she has offered to do it. And the doctor tells me I am too old myself to try the experiment. So we are left with absolutely no one, and the school term is supposed to start in three days!"

Miss Demsford sank wearily upon a seat. Miss Donovan was very grave.

"I think the trouble is," she said, "not so much the sleeping out—people are more used to that and like it better than in the old days—but keeping tidiness and order amongst the girls. There is no doubt that it will certainly be a harder matter than when they were all tucked away into rooms, especially as this is not an open-air school and the idea is quite new to every one. The younger girls will be rather excited, too, and perhaps difficult to control."

"If it were not for that point we could manage somehow," put in timid little Miss Aster. "I am qualified, of course. I could take one form for the time as well as do duty as Matron. There would be yourself, Miss Marret, Miss Crowe and Miss Drinkwater—five of us, besides the visiting mistresses. Miss Roland, too, who lives at Younton and used to be here years ago, would come back for a term, I think. Then there is this mistress from the agency people. She would come, too. But as it is——"

"I should have to give up the preparatory children this term," said the Head, "they would be too much responsibility out of doors. And there is only one Third Form, so we should have had enough mistresses. But it seems that cannot be done. Given time, it would have been possible to find plenty of good teachers who would enjoy sleeping out, but we have only three days. We cannot possibly let girls come back to Conellan, of all places, to a scratch team of teachers got together at the last moment, and then ask them to face new conditions."

The head girl, Deborah West, a tall, graceful girl of seventeen, had been listening anxiously, for she knew that the fate of her beloved Conellan hung in the balance. Now she got quietly to her feet. "Please, Miss Demsford, may I speak?"

"Certainly, Deborah," said the Head kindly, trying to smooth from her brow the deepened lines which the last few weeks' strain had set there.

"My cousin," said Deborah, "is in a self-government school in Yorkshire. She's told me a lot about it. The girls do all the discipline, you see, and take everything off the teachers' hands except the teaching. I have been wondering if we could not do something of the same thing at Conellan. If we took all that part ourselves here the mistresses would not mind coming, perhaps."

The others looked at her quickly. "You mean that you should sleep out alone and take the entire responsibility yourselves of keeping order?" said the Head.

"Yes, Miss Demsford. If other schools can do it, I don't see why we should not. I'm sure the girls would rise to the occasion, and I have always found them awfully sporting in playing up to me."

The three faces turned upon the head girl were full of interest and new hope.

"I think Deborah has found the solution," the Head announced at last slowly. "We will write to-night to all the parents, and if they agree that the girls should come back to these new conditions Conellan may yet win through."

CHAPTER II

TO RULE OR REBEL?

TAP, tap, tap, tap! The sound of the mallet was loud in the land and Biddy and Maxime, filled to the brim with intense interest and excitement, spent their last hours of freedom by getting into every one's way as much as possible—that is, out of doors, where no authorities were in evidence.

"It's the most frightfully exciting thing that ever——" In the middle of her sentence, down came Maxime over a tent-rope with a thud.

"Now then, look where you're going, can't you?" came a growl from within, and a man who had just been adjusting a tent-pole poked his head out crossly.

"I'm so sorry!" cried Maxime anxiously, jumping up and rubbing her knees. "Have I hurt it? Is it torn or anything?"

Slightly appeased at seeing only the two children, the man added good-humouredly: "Oh, all right; it would take a bigger size than you to do any damage. But why aren't you youngsters at your lessons instead of hindering round?"

"School doesn't start till to-morrow," said Biddy calmly, peering into the tent. "I say, Max, they're nice big ones. Jane says there's to be one chest of drawers for things we want now, and the rest we

shall have to keep in lockers and things in the annex, and we shall——"

"Now, now, now!" said the man. "You young ladies clear off, and mind——"

"Oh!" Down went Maxime again as they retreated, this time over a different rope, and Biddy exclaimed impatiently: "Oh, Max, what a clumsy thing you are! If you knock our dorms about like this we shall never have a roof over us. I wonder how the mistresses will sleep. I guess Miss Crowe won't like sleeping out. She frowsts terribly. It is a shame Miss Baton isn't coming back. Four B would have been all right then, because she's so keen on the open sky and all that. I wonder what the new mistresses will be like. Oh, well, it will be great sport. If Four B doesn't get some fun out of it, it won't be Four B. I say, isn't it time that train was in? Nearly all our form comes by it, and I'm simply longing to see their faces when we tell them what's happening!"

"They'll be prancing gaily over to the dorms," chuckled Maxime, "and there won't be any! Oh, hark, Biddy, there's the station bus buzzing in the distance! Come on, let's dash off to the front. I've waited the longest and I mean to be the first to break the news. Race you!"

But Biddy won, of course—she was used to winning and having her own way. However, if the impetuous pair had paused to think, they would have known that Miss Demsford had written to the parents of all the girls now returning to Conellan, who would therefore know all about the new arrangements. Indeed, far from listening to their

news with astonishment and bated breath, the arriving Four B had news to impart to *them*.

"You poor out-of-date infants!" patronized Rona Moore, breathless, however, with excitement as she dumped down her suit-case on the entrance steps. "Tents—you think you're going to tell us something new about tents! Why, we've been jawing about sleeping out all the way down in the train. Priscilla says the earwigs will crawl up the pole and drop down on us in thousands. And what with that, and having our own discipline, and doing without mistresses and——"

"What?" gasped Maxime, her eyes showing an inclination to start from her head.

"Girls," cried Rona scornfully, as she turned to the rest of Four B, "fancy, they don't even know about the discipline stunt; they've got the cheek to think they can teach *us* when they don't even know——"

"Rona Moore," broke in Biddy firmly, "if you don't hurry in with that bag and come and tell us every word of what's been happening, I'll jolly well take it myself and bump it on every step. It's scandalous the way they never told anything, but we're not going to stand you glorying over us, so don't think it!"

"And, anyway, we've seen the tents and you haven't!" declared Maxime. "Come on, Hazel, I'll give you a hand with that bag. And the man here says earwigs *don't* crawl into your ears at all —it's just a legend; and isn't it lucky the annex is all right? There's the river; but we could never have got a warm bath in that, and we're having

ground sheets on the floor and mattresses on the top, and Miss Demsford really has been awfully ill. Oh, the madeira cake that came out of the drawing-room absolutely untouched!—it jolly well made me hungry, because in the rush with my cousin being ill auntie forgot to send me the tuck she promised and——"

"Oh, a little pax!" begged Four B, as they climbed the steps, while Madge Berry gasped: "Oooh! We can tell we're back at school when Maxime starts. How you must have suffered all alone, poor dear, with words just bursting to come out!"

"What about *my* sufferings when I arrived?" remarked Biddy. Four B, however, subsided as it entered Conellan, for the head girl was just emerging from one of the rooms.

She smiled as she greeted the first batch of arrivals —Four B well to the fore, and members of other forms coming up more leisurely.

"Put all your bags in Five B form-room, will you please, every one?" she said. "Then they can be sorted out after tea, when you're told who is to share tents. We shall have a meeting, too, to talk about the new arrangements. Oh, is that Hilda Young, the new girl for Four B? Agatha Jewin, take charge of her and show her everything. Oh, hallo, Gwen! I'm awfully glad you caught this train after all—and Olive, too!"

The great ones forgathered, and Four B, seething with interest, piled its bags and washed its hands. It was too excited to pay much attention to Hilda Young, the only new-comer, a small, pale,

gentle, but bright-looking girl. It was not until the second school train had discharged its load and all Conellan was assembled at tea, that the Principal made her appearance and explained a little more fully what alterations were to be made.

"But I leave Deborah to tell you the whole thing," she concluded. "You will go to Hall in half an hour's time and listen carefully. You are all to have new responsibilities, but our head girl will have the greatest of all. I am leaving arrangements entirely to her. I know you will all play up to her and help her to make this experiment a great success."

Four B, always delighted with any new thing, clapped as loudly as the rest, and as it trooped into its sitting-room discussed the whole situation with gusto.

"We shall have our own prefects—how topping!" exclaimed Rona Moore. "No mistresses bothering round—what fun we can have!"

"Topping!" agreed Biddy, but she looked uneasy, and Four B was quick to notice it, for Biddy counted with Four B. Its ringleader in many a reckless joist with authority, she had never been overthrown yet. Overflowing with energy and audacity, accustomed at home to the freedom of an only child, Biddy respected no one except—and that secretly—Deborah West, the Principal, and, at times, her own form mistress, Miss Baton. Since her arrival at school a year ago, Biddy had made the name of the Third prominent in the eyes of its elders, and transferring at the Easter term to Four B had taken her reputation and her chums with her.

Her set had never seen Biddy with quite this uneasy look before, and its ears were pricked.

"Biddy, you don't seem a bit pleased!" accused Velma Green, popularly known as "Tuck" or "Choc."

"Well, I'm not!" returned Biddy, admitting the fact to herself at last, as she sat sideways on the table edge, slowly swinging one long slim leg.

"Look here, I don't see a bit how we're going to work this new idea. It absolutely cuts the ground from under our feet. I call it absolutely sickening. It simply spoils all our fun. Where is the sport in dodging a prefect if it is one of ourselves? If they arrange so that we can do what we jolly well like, and then leave it to our honour not to, why, there's no game in it. Whatever fun we had we shouldn't enjoy a bit, and we should just feel sneaky."

"Oh, Biddy!" groaned the members of the Fourth. Somewhere in the recesses of their beings they were experiencing the same feeling, but this they had been trying to overlook and had certainly never expected Biddy, of all people, to voice it.

"Then what shall we do, Biddy?" groaned Grace Knoler plaintively.

Biddy stood up and assumed a Napoleonic attitude. "There's only one thing for it!" she announced. "Listen, girls! We've got to reform!"

"*Reform!*" The Fourth was aghast.

"Reform," repeated Biddy firmly. Like all born leaders, she made up her mind quickly, and acted promptly. "Reform from this instant—anyway, for as long as we're sleeping out. We'll make the

Fourth a Power in the Land. I do like people to be one thing or the other, and if we can't be the jolly crowd we've been in the way we like—well, we'll do the other thing thoroughly. We'll make our form the safest in the school; they'll never need to go armed in the Fourth any more. We'll show them how self-government should be done, my braves! We'll make our form so quiet that people could drop whole papers of pins and we'd never hear them—I mean the other way round, of course! We'll work hard and play hard, and—and "—this came out with a rush, being difficult to say—" and play up to the head girl!"

Four B wavered, hesitated, and then, as often before, it followed.

"Hurrah for Biddy!"

"And now come on to Hall," put in Rona, "or we shall be late for the meeting."

Four B's seat in Hall was well to the fore, just behind the Third, while the great ones of the Upper Sixth occupied the platform to-night. Deborah was greeted with a burst of clapping and cheers from all as she rose to explain the new scheme.

"I don't think it ought to be at all difficult to keep discipline after school hours without mistresses," she said. "They do it in many schools. Of course, we always have prefects, but this is leaving more to them than has been left before. After school hours we shall absolutely govern ourselves. And then younger girls will be taking their share for the first time. The Third, I'm afraid, are hardly old enough to have their own monitors, though they'll help, I know, by giving as little

trouble as possible to the monitors from other forms. The Fifth or Sixth will have to staff them. Now, about the Fourth."

The head girl paused, her white brow knit. She threw a glance of some doubt and perplexity towards the members of the Lower Fourth, now leaning forward in a peaceful and interested row and looking as though butter would have found it hard to melt in their mouths. They *did* look good. Unfortunately, however, Deborah had her doubts as to whether the goodness went farther in than the skin. Deborah knew the Lower Fourth girls of old.

"The Upper Fourth, I'm sure, are well able to monitor themselves. But the Lower Fourth"—the startled row of faces blinked—"I wonder if the Sixth had better staff them—or if we can take their parole——"

As she paused, Gwen Grettell, of the Sixth, suddenly sprang to her feet at the table. "Oh, Deborah, *don't*! You'd far better not take their parole. You know what they are—there'll be endless trouble. It's no good starting self-government below Four A. The Lower Fourth is *hopeless*!"

The row of faces behind the Third was suddenly scarlet at this unexpected affront. A sudden fear followed. Surely Deborah wouldn't—of course, they hadn't been the quietest form in the school, but then they were going to alter all that. Every one was being called on deck and they were standing ready, too. Surely the Sixth would *realize*—would see that things were different? They directed their anxious eyes towards the head girl. Deborah would understand, anyway. *She* would

trust their good intentions. But unfortunately that was just what Deborah was finding it difficult to do. The Lower Fourth was a tremendous responsibility. It would be terrible to fail by making a mistake with the Fourth right in the beginning. If discipline once went it would be hard to get it back again. Of course, the Lower Fourth *might* come up to the scratch, but their record was sadly against them. Deborah hesitated—and the Fourth was lost.

"Oh, they're not hopeless, by any means, Gwen," she said. "But I think, perhaps, it would be better——"

"Perhaps if we ask them what they think about it, Deborah?" suggested Pauline Decker, a quiet, gentle-faced girl in the Sixth. But her counsel and that of one or two others was drowned by weight of opposing opinions.

"Oh, no, Deborah — they'll be an awful trouble!"

"Oh, Deborah, I shouldn't if I were you!"

"They're really not fit to discipline themselves —they *are* such a noisy young crowd!"

The Lower Fourth, scarlet-faced and tight-lipped, said nothing. It was not used to airing its opinions at meetings of the Fifth and Sixth, and besides, its feelings ran too deep and tumultuously for words.

Deborah still paused uncertainly. She wished that she had settled all this before the meeting. However, she would give Four B a chance, though she feared it was of no avail.

"Have any of the Lower Fourth anything to say about it?" she asked.

A stir ran through the Lower Fourth, but no one

answered. Agatha Jewin almost rose to her feet to explain about the reforming of the form, but a sudden attack of stage fright rendered her speechless, and she pretended to be looking for her handkerchief instead. The small pale face of the new girl was startled and nervous. The rest of the form, uncomfortable and still off its balance by this unexpected turn of events, looked at Biddy and waited, as usual, for her lead.

But Biddy could not have spoken if the Head herself had demanded a reply. Indignation, resentment, shame and bitter disappointment were seething within her. A big lump in her throat seemed a permanency, and a terrible desire to burst into tears and rush from the room warned her to keep her lips closed tightly for fear it should happen. So Biddy said nothing at all.

The head girl waited, but as no sound rose from the ranks of the Lower Fourth, her face grew grave and firm. Four B, to tell the truth, looked simply sullen and mutinous. There was no help there.

" Very well, then, as the Fourth has nothing to say or promise, I'm afraid we must settle it without them. We'll say the Sixth shall staff the Lower Fourth, then—one prefect to each two tents, to report and have authority in the usual way. The Upper Fourth, Fifth and Sixth will elect their own prefects. That's all to-night about that, girls."

Deborah went on speaking of other matters, but the Lower Fourth heard nothing of what was said. When the meeting was dissolved and the girls trooped down to the tents to be told in which they were to sleep, the Lower Fourth departed in a

state of mind totally different from that in which they had entered the hall.

Biddy, Maxime, and Rona Moore were too full of revolt to feel elation even when they found that they were to share a tent.

"I shall be your prefect," they were informed by Angela Paine, one of the Sixth girls. "I shall take it in turns to sleep in your tent and in the next one."

"Yes, Angela," said the sulky three.

There was a chest of drawers in each tent and a small camp washstand, and ground sheets, mattresses and neatly rolled blankets lay on the ground. At any other time the hearts of the Lower Fourth would have leapt at the strange, unusual and exciting smell of trodden earth in their bedrooms. But there was no heart-leaping to-day.

The Fourth, returning to the school buildings, was silent, until Biddy said suddenly, with would-be lightness: "Well, there's one thing about Angela —I can't stand her—but she *does* sleep soundly; some one told me so!"

The roused Fourth crowded round. "Biddy—what do you mean? Are you going to stand to what you said?"

"What about reforming now, Biddy dear?" asked Maxime anxiously.

"Reforming!" Biddy laughed scornfully and bitterly. "I should rather think not! We're not fit to be trusted to rule ourselves. All right, then—the girls who try to rule us will have to jolly well look out!"

Angela Paine marshalled the Lower Fourth off to the tents when bedtime came. "I suppose she'll

look to see if we've washed our hands ! " remarked Rona grimly; " and tuck us into bed and give us our toys ! "

Biddy said nothing. It was irritating beyond words to see the Upper Fourth swinging along ahead, with its self-elected prefects marching importantly at its side. If only the Upper Fourth had been included under the ban, matters would not have seemed so hard, but deliberately to draw a line in the middle of one form was intolerable ! It is true the name of Four A was in better odour than that of Four B, but that was a minor consideration.

" I wonder they don't form fours and do ' left, right ' down to their little beds," murmured Maxime. " If only Rebe Rushton knew she had a hole coming in the back of her stocking, she wouldn't, perhaps, look so frightfully uppish—and Madeline Forbes will drop that nightie in a minute. If I'd been prefect in Four A I'd have made them all take everything down first, as we did, and——"

" Less talking there," said Angela Paine. The Lower Fourth subsided, but thought more and more.

Had it not been for the shock and gloom of the announcement made in Hall, the Lower Fourth would have thoroughly enjoyed that first going to bed in camp. None of them had ever slept in a tent before. In Tent Nine, the little chest of drawers had been portioned out and as many things as possible stowed away in it. A patent ring of hooks clipped the pole, from which hung macs and towels : the little round iron washstand, painted green, held enamel bowl and jug. The bathrooms were not far

away. They were to hang their things, as they undressed, on a small clothes-horse.

Angela explained this to Biddy, Rona, and Maxime, and then proceeded to the next tent, saying she would return to see that they were in bed properly.

"Thank you, nursie dear," murmured Biddy, as the prefect disappeared. In spite of herself, she felt the interest of "managing" in new surroundings. The three Fourth formers found themselves giggling and joking as they undressed. The sun was still shining outside on grass and tree, and this was spring —impossible to be altogether gloomy.

"It's a bit cold!" shivered Rona, as she hurried into her pyjamas. "They say you get *frozen* just about dawn when you're sleeping out!"

"Well, *I* shan't be frozen," said Maxime superiorly. She was already ensconced on her mattress and was wrapping the blankets around her. "You only need to do them the proper way so that they don't come unrolled, and—oh!"

The other girls looked down quickly, to see Maxime's feet sticking straight out at the bottom of the blankets and Maxime regarding them with a hurt expression.

"My child, you don't know how to go about it!" declared Biddy as she seized her own blankets. "Look here, you want one first this way, and then——"

But Biddy was feeling, as she said, like a caterpillar which has got its cocoon tangled, when Angela Paine put her head into the tent.

"There's far too much noise here," she said; and:

"Good gracious, children, what are you doing? Here, let me show you!"

At length Four B was wrapped in blankets, if not in slumber, and Angela Paine bade Tent Nine good night. "I shall sleep here," she informed them, "in front of the door. We shall have the tent flap open all night so as to get plenty of air."

"Yes, Angela," said the three girls in Tent Five, coldly. She departed, and Four B, feeling endless lumps and bumps in its lowly couches, was convinced that it would never sleep. But all save Biddy were in the land of dreams when the prefects came to bed, and Biddy shut her eyes and pretended that she, too, was unconscious. An hour later Angela's grunts and sighs had subsided, her breathing grown distinctly heavy, and Biddy, too, was asleep.

Maxime had been the first to yield, and she would have slept all night had she not felt, somewhere in the small hours, a hand shaking her arm. She started up, stifling a scream. Biddy was sitting up, laughing in the moonlight, her finger on her lips. As Maxime stared Biddy leaned slowly to her other side and lifted the bottom of the tent canvas. Maxime saw that she had loosened the peg so that it slipped easily out of the ground.

"Look!" motioned Biddy. Maxime looked. She saw what Biddy meant her to see—that there was plenty of room for anyone to slip out of the tent that way without Angela hearing. Outside was the moonlight—and freedom!

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND

BIDDY and Maxime gazed from beneath the tent with longing eyes, and if Angela Paine had been enjoying her usual calm night's slumber there is no knowing what escapade might have happened next. However, Angela turned over at that moment and unwrapped her blankets, sending a cold chill down her spine, which caused her to grunt and stir uneasily.

Biddy dropped the canvas in a flash, and before Angela became conscious of her surroundings the two girls were lying curled up in their blankets, to all appearance sleeping the serene sleep of the young and blameless.

It was fortunate for Angela in the days which followed that sleep happened to be her strong point, for the period after "Lights Out" was the only time of rest she obtained during her hours as a prefect.

The Lower Fourth was—well, words failed Angela! "Of course I knew they had a bad name," she unburdened herself to her contemporaries, "though I never had much to do with them. But if they were terrible when there was always a mistress about, imagine—just *imagine*, girls!—what they are like when there's no one for us to appeal to but other prefects!"

" Olive and I don't need to imagine—we know ! " returned Agatha Miller grimly. " I took their prep last night. And to think that Deborah actually hesitated about making them self-governing ! Why, they'd have burnt the school down, or thrown the desks into the river in a week ! It's as Gwen Grettell said—they are quite, *quite* hopeless."

The girls of the Lower Fourth would have taken a defiant but melancholy pride in this conversation had it been overheard. They did not believe in doing things by halves. If they were not to be rulers, like the members of the Upper Fourth and higher forms, then they would be thorough-paced rebels. After making their minds up to play for the good of Conellan, they had been repulsed by the (quite natural) distrust of the upper school, and were now suffering from a strong reaction in the opposite direction.

Still greater sufferers were the unhappy prefects who endeavoured to maintain discipline in the Lower Fourth out of school hours. They were determined not to bother Deborah more than was necessary, now that her responsibilities were so much greater ; and, of course, as the Fourth well knew, it was quite against the spirit of the new scheme to take these matters to the Head or any of the mistresses.

So the prefects struggled on, while in all the small, trying ways in which it is possible for schoolgirls to give trouble the Lower Fourth gave it, without, however, getting much enjoyment from the game, if the truth be told.

" I wish we could do something really exciting ! " sighed Maxime, as she and Biddy, one evening, plus

towels and sponges, made their way towards the bathrooms.

"I'll tell you what I'd simply love to do!" exclaimed Biddy, with a glad glint in her eye. "That is, loosen all the tent-ropes of the Fifth and Sixth, and then in the night go along and pull up all those at the back. Down the tents would go one after another, with all the Great Ones underneath! What shrieks there'd be! Of course we'd go and dig them out and be awfully helpful!"

Maxime giggled with enjoyment. "Biddy—what a mad idea! It would be too thrilling for words; but they wouldn't be five minutes finding out that we'd done it, and then——"

"I know." Biddy abandoned the scheme reluctantly. "But we certainly must do *something*. I say, we'll slip out to-night while Angela's in the land of dreams, and then it's hey over hill and dale under the moon! Angela won't hear a thing. We can work those two pegs out, and put them back when we return. Luckily all the tents face the other way, so if any of the other girls do happen to wake they'll only think we're cats, or weasels, or something."

Maxime clasped her sponge with both hands, unheeding its overflow on to her bedroom slippers. "Oh, Biddy, that will be glorious! We'll ask Rona, too."

Rona, approached cautiously during prep, made the signs for excitement and joy. There was no doubt as to Rona's approbation.

It seemed as though Angela would never get to sleep that night. She grunted and tossed for so

long that the girls were almost in despair before her steady, gentle snore broke the stillness of the camp. Every one else was now in bed, and darkness had settled down. Maxime, tense with excitement, leaned over and clutched Biddy's arm.

" Can't we start now ? " she whispered.

" Of course not, you idiot ! " Biddy breathed back. " Not for two hours at least."

" I shall be asleep," muttered Rona. Asleep, too, she was in less than ten minutes. Biddy, thrilled with the desperate deed in prospect, felt that she herself would not have the least difficulty in keeping awake. However, before many minutes had passed, she was trying every known expedient to keep herself awake, including pinching her arm and lying on the boniest part of her pillow. Then she took to counting sheep going over a gate, her sleepy mind forgetting that this counting was a cure for *sleeplessness*. That may have been the reason why two hours later she was deep in slumber.

In fact, had it not been for Maxime the expedition would never have started at all. It was she who, after a restless vigil, cautiously awakened the others at about the appointed time.

They awoke with a start, disposed to murmur, and then, remembering the adventure ahead, they crept stealthily out of their blankets. The still snoring form of Angela lay stretched on the mattress just inside the door.

The girls reached for their mackintoshes, which hung on the pole-hooks. They were always brought to the tents at night for use in the event of rain

when the Forms returned to the school in the morning. The girls slipped them over their pyjamas. Biddy, stooping, worked away till first one tent peg and then another was out of the ground. Listening with bated breath for any movement on Angela's part, the three adventurers crept out under the tent and stood in the open, free!

It was a tremendous moment. There rose the long lines of tents, silent and dim, sheltering the sleeping girls of Conellan School. Even the mighty prefects slept, unconscious that only a few feet away three of the girls placed under their care were preparing to transgress all the rules of the school—three truants of Four B.

Yes, the moment had its thrill of triumph; but also, it must be confessed, a rather overwhelming sense of ill-doing, and a little spice of scare.

Biddy pulled the others by the sleeve. At any moment some one might awaken in those tents and then—— They crept away towards the edge of the grounds. Not until they were a quarter of a mile from the silent camp did they dare to lift their voices in speech.

"Where are you taking us, Biddy?" inquired Rona in hushed tones.

"I've got a gorgeous idea!" explained Biddy. "You know the little island on the river that we've always longed to explore? Of course we shall never be able to in the ordinary way, because even the river is out of bounds except with mistresses, and the island's a good way from here. But this is our one glorious chance! We can go wherever we like; we can really see that island!"

The other girls halted, struck by the brilliance of the suggestion.

"Splendid!" gasped Rona. "There's an old punt there, isn't there?"

"Yes, it's an awful old thing," put in Maxime excitedly, "no one's ever been seen using it, but we'll make it carry us over! Oh, girls, aren't you glad I stayed awake? If it hadn't been for me, we should never have been able to come!"

"Ooo!" The others exhibited signs of indignation. "We should have woke up in another minute!" declared Rona coldly.

"And I expect Maxime only kept herself awake talking in her sleep!" declared Biddy. "We know what she *is* for talking. Come on, race you to the island!"

The moon was shining clearly as they reached the river and looked out towards the mysterious island. It was quite a large island, with a small wood upon it, apparently never visited by any of the people from the village. The river there, though wide, was shallow and weedy, unfitted for either swimming or boating, and its fish were few and far between. To most people the stream on the other side of the village was far more attractive, and the island was left alone.

"I don't believe it even has a name!" murmured Maxime. They stood gazing, with a delicious stir of the blood. The gleam of moonlight on the trees, the silence of surrounding night and river, touched the island with an even greater air of mystery than it had held before.

With a little catch of her breath, Biddy broke the

spell at last by plunging down the bank towards the river. "We can't stand staring all night!" she cried.

The other girls followed, to find Biddy unfastening the ancient rope of the punt. "It's all right!" she announced. "I believe those people from Grange Park used it for bathing from. They've gone now and left it behind, so there's no one to mind our taking it."

"I suppose it won't suddenly go to the bottom?" inquired Maxime, stepping in somewhat cautiously after the others.

"Well, we can only try and see!" laughed Biddy gaily. "Here's an old paddle. Now then—sit tight!"

But as she pushed off, laughing, Rona said in a low, hushed voice: "Don't talk so loudly, Biddy!"

"Why on earth not?" exclaimed Biddy, lowering her voice, however, and glancing round.

"I don't know. It seems——" Rona broke off uncertainly, and the others catching the infection of her mood, it was almost in silence that they climbed up the bank of the island and faced the wood.

The dark trees stood close together as though they were hiding a secret from the moonlight. It was all very still.

"Do you think——" began Maxime in a whisper, and then abruptly, Biddy shook herself impatiently.

"We're actually getting scared!" she cried in quite a loud voice. "Come on—I'm going in! I've got Angela's old bit of candle and five matches, and if the moon doesn't shine in, *they* will! It's her extra one; she'll think she's lost it."

Determinedly she marched forward, and the others took their places at her side.

It was certainly an experience to creep through that silent little wood in the middle of the night, when they were supposed to be asleep in bed, and as nothing uncanny happened, the girls began to enjoy the thrill, though for those first few moments they had actually begun to think uneasily of fairy-haunted glens and banshee woods. "It's a simply darling little place!" declared Maxime. "Oh!—and look! There's quite a little clearing in the—— *Oh!*"

A cry and a bump ended her remarks, and the others dashed forward anxiously. Only the top part of Maxime was to be seen clinging on to earth and stone with both hands, the lower part of her having vanished mysteriously.

"What is it? What's happened?" gasped the others, seizing her frantically.

"I'm in some sort of a hole!" cried Maxime. "Mind! Oh, there she goes!"

"Oh!" Another small shriek rent the night air, as Rona, who had leaned forward in her anxiety to rescue Maxime, suddenly overbalanced and went rolling and tumbling down into space. The others held their breath in horror until the rolling ceased, and then called out with trembling tones: "Oh, Rona, *Rona*! Are you hurt?"

A muffled voice replied from below: "All serene! Only a few bruises! I say—this is an awful big hole! Go easy!"

"Come on, Max—you must get out somehow!" cried Biddy, who was still hanging on to her friend.

" One, two, three, and a strong pull ! Good egg ! " A moment later, Maxime stood on the grass beside her, and Biddy called down to the unseen Rona, " Half a minute, Rona—don't move till I light the candle ! "

Fortunately there was no wind moving inside the little wood, and by the light of the candle Biddy and Maxime were able to scramble down over the stones and through bushes to where Rona crouched upon a big boulder.

" That's all right ! " She breathed a sigh of relief, stretching. " I might have moved really, I see, but I daren't in the dark for fear of going down into some fearful depths. What a queer place this is ! "

Biddy cast the light of the candle round. " It's like a miniature quarry," she said. " It *is* an odd nook to find in the middle of a wood ! "

" In the middle of an island, too ! " cried Maxime. " This is just the place to discover anything ! Let's explore, now we've tumbled in. It goes down a bit deeper. Do let me have the candle now, Biddy ! "

Carefully shielding the light, Maxime took the lead into the shadows.

" It's nothing but bushes and stones and things ! " reported the others. " Come on, let's get up again ! " The next moment, however, they turned with startled faces at Maxime's cry of excitement.

" Girls, girls ! There's a cave ! "

" A *cave* ! " Incredulous, but thrilled, Rona and Biddy hastened to where Maxime, holding back branches and hanging ivy, was peering, it seemed, into the very earth itself.

"It *can't* be a real cave!" breathed Rona.

But it *was* a real cave, they were obliged and delighted to admit that. Rough boulders, such as those outside, had wedged into a kind of arch to withstand the downward tilt of earth, and had framed an opening about five feet high, going back some six feet into the bank.

The floor was soft and mossy, but the most attractive property of this cave was that it really was a *secret* one; the hanging ivy and the bushes entirely hid it from the view of anyone save explorers.

"And to think that it was only just through chance that we discovered it!" cried Maxime, straightening up, with awe and joy lighting her countenance.

"I knew there'd be something gorgeous on this island!" breathed Biddy in a thrilled voice.

They ventured in. After that discovery, the rest of the island held nothing to vie in interest with the secret of the cave. There is something about a cave—especially a hidden cave—which appeals to all ages of human beings. This discovery on an island in the middle of the night seemed an event to give them the sensations of conquerors of the world. It was not until a gradual feeling of intense weariness crept over them and it became difficult to keep their eyes open, that the girls came back to everyday life and the fact that they were more than two miles from school, with the night drawing to a close.

"Great Scott!" declared Biddy in a scared voice, glancing at her wrist-watch. "Just look at the time, girls! We shall simply have to fly back!"

"I wish we *could* fly!" rejoined Maxime rather limply, "for I'm sure my feet will get fairly tangled when I try to walk! I wonder why the night time——"

"Oh, don't start talking, Max, come on to the boat!" cried Rona, seizing her arm. They hurried down to the water where the old punt still floated and, clambering aboard, pushed over and started on their tramp for home.

"I daren't think about the morning!" groaned Maxime, as they came within sight of the glimmering tents of Conellan.

"*Don't* think about it!" whispered Biddy. "Think how to get in without waking our respected guardian. If you tread on a rope this time, Maxime, I'll—I'll expel you!"

But Maxime did not tread on a rope, and they crept safely inside without disturbing anyone, thrust back the pegs, and snuggled into the blankets with blinking eyes.

After that, everything was a blank until they were roused by some intruding person shaking them one after the other by the shoulders, and calling in their ears.

"Rona! Biddy! Maxime!" came the shocked voice of Angela into their dreams. "Aren't you *ever* going to get up?"

With weary yawns and the rubbing of eyelids which simply craved to close, the three truants tumbled out sulkily to another day of school.

CHAPTER IV

THE NIGHT OWL CLUB

"WE simply must tell the others!" exclaimed Maxime after class, sharpening away at a pencil with some agitation. "About the cave, I mean."

Olive Gunnell, one of the prefects, had dropped on the three friends for untidiness in the cloak-room and for speaking in the corridor, and had given them, besides an order mark, the penance of sharpening pencils, cleaning and filling inkwells and putting out new blotting-paper for Form B. If these duties had come to them as monitorial responsibilities, the trio would have enjoyed the task; but as it was they put the last touch to the sulkiness following an almost sleepless night.

"I wonder they trust us with pen-knives!" grumbled Biddy. "And fancy small babies like ourselves being allowed to fill inkwells; we might spoil our little pinafores altogether. As for telling about the cave, Max, we simply *daren't*. Every one will want to go and see it, and before you can say 'Jack Robinson' the whole thing will come out!"

"It would be a gorgeous place to meet in," sighed Rona. "Can't you imagine candles stuck round and cushions to sit on, and some grub? We could have splendid secret societies!"

"I know; it *would* be fine!" agreed Biddy. "Phew! Now I've torn that paper, and the wrong way, too; there'll be trouble about *that*! I do think Miss Scallon ought to settle about pencils, monitors and things; the prefects seem to be fussing round all the time. But, about taking people to the cave—I guess there's only one Angela in Conellan. Not many prefects would lie calmly guarding an empty tent all night and not know a thing about it!"

"Well, there's the tent next door, that Angela takes turn in sleeping in," suggested Maxime hopefully.

Biddy nodded thoughtfully, picking up a penknife. "Yes. Let's see—there are three in there: Hazel Greene, Grace Knoler, and Hilda Young, that new girl."

"Well, we couldn't have Hilda Young, anyway," put in Rona hastily. "She's new, and she's an awful mouse of a girl."

"Do you know, I rather like her," returned Biddy. "She's awfully quiet and all that; but there's something rather—oh, sort of genuine about her! And we're such a noisy lot; I suppose it's a change. I get on rather well with her. And she's pretty hot at bowling, too! Beats any of us hollow. I saw Gwen Grettell trying her down at the nets."

"Oh, well, if you like her, that settles it," said Rona comfortably. "We'll ask them all. But I don't believe Hilda will come; she has some funny ideas."

Biddy looked at her with a touch of scornful

surprise. "Not come! A new girl! I guess she'll be pretty flattered. Look here—let's settle to go the night after next. We'll take——"

"What *are* you girls doing?" Olive Gunnell put her head in at the door with a frown of irritation. "I told you to get on with that job quickly and not talk; and here you are with it only half done—talking your heads off! I really don't know what to do with you. You are a hopeless lot! If it weren't that I don't want to worry her, I'd march the whole lot of the Lower Fourth right up to Deborah and see if she couldn't raise a spark of conscience in you! I'm coming back in two minutes, and if I hear a word more from you I shall report you to Deborah."

The three Form B girls subsided sulkily, but before Olive had traversed the length of the corridor, Biddy was muttering:

"Hopeless, are we? Seem to have heard that word before! *You'll* feel still more hopeless before it's over. As for jawing, I never heard anyone jaw like Conellan prefects!"

"They *never* let us alone!" Maxime joined in disgustedly. The fact was determinedly ignored that it had taken a good many last straws to break finally the temper of some of the prefects, where the Lower Fourth was concerned. The rest of the school was playing up to the new arrangement with all its might, and the Lower Fourth, as the blot on the escutcheon, brought bitterness to the hearts of the Fifth and Sixth. And in that fact the Lower Fourth rejoiced, grimly, though not happily. Always at the back of their minds was the thought:

" It's their own fault. If they hadn't treated us like babies . . ."

The three night adventurers quickly discovered that there were not *nearly* enough convenient nooks at Conellan for discussing really serious secrets and plans. It was not until the following day as the Upper and Lower Fourth strolled down to cricket practice, that they had a chance of broaching the subject to the girls in Tent Eight.

The first words of it, however, were enough to set the others agog to hear the whole story.

" Oh, come down by the beech trees ! " begged Grace Knoler. " There's no one there, and we're not starting till Gretel Bayne comes to prefect."

On the grass, under the shade of the beeches, the story was unfolded, chiefly by Biddy, while the other three girls leaned forward, with bated breath, hanging on every word. Even the new girl's eyes lit up with excitement, though she did not say much, and as Biddy had foretold, the tale was scarcely finished when Grace and Hazel were interrupting with : " Oh, how gorgeous it would be to see it ! Oh, Biddy, can't we come ? "

" Of course it's frightfully dangerous, you know," warned Maxime, with a portentous air. " In fact, even Four B has never done anything so *terribly* dangerous before. It only needs one slip over a rope——"

" And that would be yours ! " put in Rona ; but Maxime refused to be turned aside.

" We tremble to think what would happen if it was found out. Of course, the great thing is that we want to have a feast there; wouldn't it be glorious

and romantic, in a cave on an island in the middle of the night with some good things to eat—cake and sardines, and plenty of candles——"

"I hate candles raw," murmured Rona, still unnoticed.

"But we haven't thought of any good way of getting the grub," continued Maxime. "All the girls in books seem able to, but we never have a chance. If we go to the village there's always a prefect along; so if you come to the cave, you'll jolly well have to think up some scheme for getting food there!"

"Oh, then you *are* going to let us come, Biddy!" exclaimed Grace and Hazel joyously.

Biddy nodded with dignity. "But you mustn't breathe a word to anyone till we see how things go off. When we go depends on when we can get some grub. Gretel will be along in a minute. Do set your brains to work and think out a way."

If Four B girls had ever thought so hard in Form as they appeared to be thinking now, there would have been little cause for the constant despair of Miss Scallon, their new form mistress. Suddenly Hazel sprang to her feet with an exclamation.

"I know—the very thing! We want a messenger from the outside world, like other prisoners have. Well, last Saturday Grace and I were doing our gardens when a boy and girl came along—oh, about thirteen. They'd come to bring cook one of their black kittens, and she'd asked for another because they were good mousers. They'd lost their way; of course, we told them how to get out of the grounds, and they mentioned that they were

bringing that other kitten on Friday. Now, do you think we could manage to get hold of them and that they'd get some grub for us ? "

" Oh, topping idea ! " exclaimed the others, and then sprang to their feet hastily. " There's Gretel. Bother ! "

They were forced to make their way towards the cricket nets ; but Biddy found time to say : " We must collect what we can for Friday and capture those kids." Then, while the others ran forward, a low voice at her elbow made her turn. Hilda, with a flush on her usually pale cheeks, spoke quickly :

" Biddy—it's—it's awfully kind of you to ask me, but I'm—I'm afraid I can't come to the feast ! "

Biddy halted. " You can't come to the feast ? " she frowned incredulously. " Great Scott ! Anyone else in Four B would give their heads to come ! "

" I know," Hilda went on hastily. " I do think it's awfully nice of you to ask me, when I'm only a new girl—but I really *can't* come ! "

" Oh, I see ! " Biddy tossed her head and curled the corner of her lips. " It's too dangerous. You're afraid to come ! "

" No—I——" The new girl suddenly drew herself up and bit her lip. " Yes—I suppose I am afraid ! "

" Right-o ! " said Biddy contemptuously, turning away ; and at the same moment Maxime ran up.

" Oh, I say, Biddy, come on, Gretel's asking for you."

Biddy nodded towards the new girl. " Hilda won't come—she's afraid."

"Won't come!" gasped Maxime indignantly. "Well, Rona *said* she wouldn't, but I just didn't believe it!" She glared at the unfortunate new girl, like an enthusiastic lady-of-waiting at some one who had failed to appreciate the royal favour of the queen. "And we've told her all about it, too. If she's like that, she may——"

"Oh, you know I wouldn't dream of telling, if that's what you mean!" Hilda Young broke in, her lips trembling. And then the three girls, summoned by the impatient Gretel, hurried forward to take their places in the field.

The scheme for the Night Owls' expedition to the hidden cave went with a smoothness which almost scared Maxime, who declared it uncanny. The boy and girl with the kitten made their appearance just as the right members of the Lower Fourth were engaged upon their gardens, and when no one in authority happened to be about. Hazel was easily able to transfer the collective wealth of the five adventurers, and to persuade the visitors to buy some groceries from the village shop and hide them in the ditch at the back of the field where the tents stood.

"Nobody's about in the afternoon," explained Hazel in a low, cautious voice. "We'll give you a shilling each if you do this for us!"

"Us'd do a lot for a shillun!" grinned the boy. He and his sister, a brown, round, freckle-faced pair, seemed to think the whole affair great fun. They even agreed to come on a certain day each week and peer over the side hedge into the shrubbery. If Hazel had tied a tiny piece of red material

to a certain tree that would mean they were to wait until she got a chance to come out.

"So we can have another feast any time we like!" remarked Biddy with satisfaction in a low voice to Maxime, when Hazel had passed on the information.

"Oh, superbus!" proclaimed Maxime's whisper, and then came a wail of lamentation. "Oh, *look*, if I haven't been and dug up all those seeds I put in two weeks ago! I thought they were weeds; but I remember now I got Miss Donovan to buy them, and they were Virginia stock, and I thought they'd just go nicely round the border, and then Angela said we'd got to go and clear up our tents, and I never put a label on them. And it was just the same when I had those carnations: the cat came and dug them up, and every one else—— Hullo, there's that Hilda Young coming! I do believe Deborah's given her that plot next to you. Botheration! Well, I've got to fly for piano practice. Wonder if those things will grow; but I can't stay now!" She dashed off to stow away her spade in the toolshed, and Hilda, with a swift, shy glance at Biddy's unresponsive face, began work upon her new plot.

She was a pale child, looking none too strong, and Biddy could hear her breathing quickly as she struggled with the weedy ground. Against her will Biddy felt once more that odd drawing towards the pale, quiet child so unlike herself.

"Here," she said abruptly, "let me have a try at that. It's not been done since Janet Blake had it last year. You can go on cutting off those

dead flowers on my bed if you like. You don't look very sinewy."

"Oh, thank you ever so much!" returned Hilda, flushing and yielding up her spade. "I'm not used to digging, but I should soon get into the way. I'm heaps stronger since I came here and started sleeping out. I just love sleeping out, don't you?"

"Oh, it's all right," replied Biddy briefly. The other girl hesitated a moment, and then, turning an earnest, appealing face on Betty, she said:

"I wish—do you mind if I explain?—about not going to the feast and all that—I *do* want you to know! You see, we're not at all well off, and Dad's business had been going badly, and there are lots of us children and I'm the eldest, and you know how expensive schools are—and Mother and Dad are so anxious we should have a good education. And you know there's a progressive scholarship at Conellan. If a girl wins it one term she has a year's schooling here free. Well, I do so want to win it and relieve them at home! I'm not clever; I shall have to work *awfully* hard even to have a chance. And, of course, order marks and any sort of scrape would count against one; I *do* want to keep straight as far as I can. I'm not talking about whether the feast is wrong or not to you—I mean, going out at night and all that—oh, dear, I'm making it seem awful! I know how you feel, and I *do* think they might have trusted you, and I think it's a most awfully tempting plan. Don't think I'm setting up—I mean I'm sure it's not right for *me*! I haven't any grudge; and,

besides, I think I absolutely *ought* to keep straight ! " Hilda paused, breathless with the effort of her long explanation. Then she ventured timidly: " Please, Biddy, don't you think so, too ? "

Biddy, who had been leaning on the spade to listen, now thrust it into the earth with a vicious thud. Then, after a moment's silence, she suddenly threw up her head. " Yes, I suppose I do, really." She smiled wryly. " Well, we haven't got any characters to lose, so we're going. You're a funny kid ; but I rather like you, somehow."

" Oh, th-th-thank you, Biddy ! " stammered Hilda confusedly over the flowers. Then she brought out explosively : " You're—you're *splendid* ! "

Biddy, however, knew quite well that she was not splendid, and so it was a relief at this instant to hear the first tea bell ringing in the house and to have to dash off for a wash.

The conspirators' first taste of bad luck began on the great day fixed for the feast, when unexpectedly the rain began to descend with fury. The girls slopped off to the tents in dripping macs, and between the occupants of Tent Nine and those of Tent Eight passed melancholy murmurs.

" It simply can't be done to-night," pronounced Biddy mournfully. " Our things would get sopping and just give the game away. We must go to-morrow."

" And there's all that stuff hidden in the ditch ! " groaned Maxime tragically. " There won't be a single chance to move it till to-morrow night ! "

There were more groans than Maxime's the next night, however. The rain had ceased, and the

air was still and warm when five dim forms stole down, rescued a big parcel from the ditch, and hastened with all speed to the island.

Even its first discoverers could not fail to be satisfied with the delight of Grace and Hazel in the secret cave.

"It's just *wonderful*!" they exclaimed in rapture. "If we can only smuggle some things out to make cushions and little shelves and things! We can make it absolutely beautiful!"

Recklessly they tore open the bundle of candles and lit five, sticking them round the cave. It certainly did look delightful, and the candlelight shone on five very excited and rapturous faces. The rapture faded into horror, however, when the contents of the parcel were fully examined; and Maxime, picking up the loaf, dropped it again hurriedly with a wild and sudden shriek.

"*Ow!* Oh, what is it?"

The startled girls clung together, too scared to move, as a small, black object dropped from the loaf and ran for its life, and then they broke into peals of laughter. "Oh, Max, it's only a mouse, you cuckoo! You'll bring people from miles around!"

"Phew! Well, anyway, it's half eaten our loaf," replied Maxime defensively. "And, oh—look—the loaf's all soft, and it's got two slugs on it!"

This time there were general exclamations of horror, and the loaf was flung disgustedly out amongst the boulders.

"We shall have to eat chocolate biscuits with

the tinned meat, that's all," said Maxime with a sigh of resignation.

Altogether, however, in spite of these mishaps, the feast was a tremendous success. When, later, Biddy raised the bottle of lemonade with the cry: "Here's to the Night Owls' Club!" the toast was drunk in turns amidst scenes of the wildest enthusiasm.

The girls arrived back at the tents without mishap, but their condition on the following day moved Miss Scallon to despair.

"Really, one would imagine, to look at some of you girls to-day," she said, "that you were at least a hundred, or had been dancing through every night of the week. I look around the rest of the school and see brightness, enthusiasm and rosy cheeks, instead of the sulky, lazy expression prevalent in Four B. Every one else seems much the better for sleeping out. Biddy, can you not get any sleep in the tent?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Scallon," returned Biddy hurriedly, while the rest of the five, luckily unnoticed for the second, turned a brilliant red. Miss Scallon was getting far too near the truth for comfort.

"Then if you have had a good night's sleep," said Miss Scallon severely, "you require none now. You, Biddy, Rona Moore, Grace, Hazel and Maxime are the worst offenders. Open your eyes properly, sit up straight, answer briskly!"

"Yes, Miss Scallon," murmured the culprits faintly.

The Night Owls lay low for a few days, and then they paid another visit to the cave to convey

various biscuit-tins and odds and ends brought by "The Pair," and smuggled materials, which they stuffed with pine needles for cushions. Couches were made from larch branches, and various crude contrivances, regarded with pride by their makers, were constructed to hold the candles. Fresh pocket money having just been served out, the Night Owls had invested in two tin mugs, a six-penny kettle and a threepenny frying-pan.

And then "The Pair" electrified them by the announcement that they could do nothing more as their family was moving "t' town."

"Oh, dear!" gasped the dismayed Maxime, who happened to be the one to interview them behind the shrubbery. "Well, look here, this is all the money we've got left now. Will you promise to get us one more feast before you go?"

The boy nodded. "Us'll put some more stuff there before we goes on Monday morning," he promised. "That'll be the last time us can come."

"All right," said Maxime mournfully. "Put them in one of those large biscuit-tins again, and be sure you bring bacon, now we've got a frying-pan."

This was to be a far more gorgeous feast than before, now that the cave was fitted up with all modern conveniences. The Night Owls talked about it whenever there was an opportunity, and Hilda, who was in the secret, could not conceal a rather wistful attention.

"You really want to come, you know," laughed Biddy carelessly.

"Only she's too good!" sniffed Rona. "And we're wicked—why, *Biddy*'s simply awfully wicked!"

"Oh, Rona, I never said—I never thought——" began Hilda in distress.

"I can't think how you *can* be like that!" cried Maxime indignantly. "Not many new girls would be taken notice of, and when Biddy's been so decent as to ask you——"

"Oh, shut up, Max!" put in Biddy hastily. At the same time a distinct feeling of pique was still alive within her breast. She was so accustomed to having the girls of Four B following her lead and thinking whatever she did was fine, that Hilda's unusual resistance aroused a half-amused, half-ashamed resentment. Even the other girls thought it extraordinary, the way the new girl behaved in face of Biddy's graciousness. She spoke coolly. "There's no reason why Hilda should be absolutely overwhelmed by such a great honour as——"

"Oh, but Biddy—you know I do think——" Hilda halted, blinking hard. Biddy knew quite well what she wanted to say—she knew that Hilda *did*, for some odd reason, admire and like her, but an impish impulse seized her suddenly. In that moment she put away thought of all that Hilda had told her. Why should not Hilda do this because she, Biddy, wanted her to? Why should this little, insignificant new girl stand out against the leader of Four B? Besides, she told herself, Hilda would really enjoy it—it would do her good—she was much too frightfully proper. She liked Hilda—she wanted her to have a good time, to join in things. Varied emotions prompted her next careless words.

"My dear child, it's all right. There's no reason why you should want to please me or be particular friends with any of us. I expect you think I am an awful being, and——"

"Oh!" Hilda stood biting her lip. Then she turned on the other girl a wide, anxious, earnest gaze which made Biddy feel suddenly ashamed. "Biddy, I'll go! I didn't think of it like that. I'll go."

"Good," said Biddy briefly, turning away to hide that feeling of shame and surprise. "Well, now all the arrangements are made for next Monday. We'll have a splendid time."

"It seems too lovely to be true!" exclaimed Maxime. "I do just hope nothing will go wrong."

"What *could* go wrong?" scoffed Biddy. Inwardly, however, a most unpleasant misgiving was beginning to make its presence felt. Suppose—suppose something *did* go wrong!

She began to wish—she really, *really* wished that she had not persuaded Hilda to join the Night Owls, now that it was done!

CHAPTER V

WHILE ANGELA SLEPT

"DEBORAH'S coming down to the nets to-day!"

The news, emanating from some unknown source, ran like wildfire through the groups of Upper and Lower Fourth girls assembling for cricket practice, leaving a thrill of excitement behind. It was long since Deborah had troubled to attend even a match where the Fourth Form was concerned, while looking on at practice would have been sheer waste of her time as games captain. The Upper Fourth, though industrious and well-intentioned, was not strong on sport, while the Lower Fourth had long ceased to be looked to for talent.

However, to-day it was agreed that wonders would never cease, for "some one" had heard that Margaret Clinn was bringing Deborah West along especially to see the play of a Fourth Form girl. It was a new girl, too—Hilda Young. Fortunately for Hilda, she did not arrive until Deborah and Margaret had come upon the scene, so was too late to hear the rumours, which would almost certainly have broken her nerve.

Margaret sent her in to bat at once and Hilda put up quite a good fight until she was bowled out by Biddy. However, there was nothing startling about

her play, and the head girl's eyebrows looked inquiry which Margaret answered in a low voice:

"Wait till she gets the ball!" The prefect stepped forward. "I want Hilda to bowl now."

Hilda felt a trifle of nervousness at the thought that the head girl was looking on, but she alone of all the Fourth was unconscious of the reason for her presence. She took the ball and stepped into position with that feeling of exhilaration which comes when one is about to put forth one's best efforts in a sport one loves. She found a good length with the first ball and at the third, Rona Moore ruefully retired before her. Margaret then sent in one of the Upper Form girls, whose middle stump lay low with the first delivery. One of her form fellows stayed in longer and made a good hit to leg. Then, springing forward to meet the next onslaught, she was out l.b.w.

The procession to the crease went on with still little to show in the way of batting, and still Margaret kept the flushed Hilda fixed to the ball.

Hilda was too absorbed in the part she was playing to wonder why she alone had so far been put up to bowl. But at length she was aware of a sensation amongst the onlookers and was startled back to consciousness.

Deborah herself was walking, smiling, towards the crease!

Deborah had been rather impressed by Hilda's performance, as the prefect had intended. It is true that to defeat players of the despised Fourth was not exactly a triumph, but there was something about Hilda's lithe action

and her way of handling the ball which aroused attention.

"Let me stand up to the child," she had said, and there had followed the terrifically exciting event of the head girl condescending to enter the lists against the bowling of a Lower Fourth.

Hilda could scarcely believe her eyes. She drew a quick breath.

"Come along, Hilda," called Deborah kindly, as she took the bat from Florence Hines. "Send me along one of your best."

Hilda bit her lip, pulled herself together. She must not let this astonishing happening spoil her play. Her heart beating fast, she tried to remember what she had seen of Deborah's way with the willow. Although so slim and quiet, Deborah was a hard hitter, and one given to taking risks, which generally were justified. Hilda remembered that "chancy" delivery she had acquired with such toil and pain from her cricketer uncle last year. That is, she had half-acquired it, for the occasions on which she had managed to pull it off were few and far between; nor had her uncle, he told her, been more uniformly successful. It appeared to be a long slow ball which, when it had put the unwary off their guard, hit the ground and sprang up with a sudden spurting revelation of speed. Could she tempt the great Deborah with this?

No doubt Deborah, in spite of her interest, was hardly prepared to take a new Four B bowler seriously. At all events, as the straight slow ball approached she lifted her bat confidently for one of her terrific hits.

And the next moment—"click!"—a sudden gasp from the onlookers, a startled sensation in the mind of the head girl; and she turned to see the middle stump at an angle which shouted "Out!" as plainly as an umpire.

"Well, I'm bothered!" exclaimed Deborah, smiling with rueful amusement.

The Fourth, hardly knowing whether to cheer Hilda or lament the fall of Deborah, wavered between the two, until Deborah, throwing down her bat, clapped her slim hands heartily. Then they joined in with vociferation, Biddy the loudest of all.

"Well bowled!" cried Deborah, and Hilda, feeling that she was dreaming, heard Margaret Clinn say: "That's enough for to-day, child. Take Dora's place and field. You kids can carry on alone now—Maxime to go in next."

As the two older girls walked away, Margaret was saying: "I hope you didn't mind my bringing you down, Deborah, but the kid seems tc me rather a marvel."

"I should say she is!" agreed the head girl warmly. "Well, there's no vacancy in the *First* now, but we'll certainly do as you suggest."

The Four B sitting-room was not greatly patronized during the summer, but on the following afternoon, a Saturday, it happened to be full. Starting out in summer heat and sunshine, the weather had given way to a burst of angry rain, and games and walks had had to be abandoned. Four B was trying to find solace in work for stalls at the annual garden-party which Conellan ran in aid

of a children's home. They were working more or less contentedly when the door opened and there entered Hilda Young, bearing with her an air of suppressed excitement which at once riveted upon her the attention of Four B.

"Hullo! here's Hilda Young—absolutely bubbling over with something or other. Out with it, Hilda! Don't keep us in awful suspense!"

But Hilda, her small face flushed, her eyes shining, hesitated near the door and then went timidly towards the corner where Biddy was struggling with raffia work.

"Biddy," she said, in a shaking voice, "I want to tell you. I—I—Margaret's just sent for me."

"Yes?" Biddy looked up with a good-humoured twinkle from the somewhat distorted shopping bag on which she was engaged. "Oh, Hilda—in hot water again! Shameful!"

"No—but, Biddy—look!" Shyly, Hilda opened her hand and held it out with something lying on the palm.

It was a small, five-cornered patch pocket of pale blue linen, embroidered with initials and a number in roman figures.

Biddy stared at it, and then she sprang excitedly to her feet. "Hilda—your colours!"

Hilda nodded, her lips trembling. "The second eleven, of course," she said faintly.

"My hat! Girls!" Biddy turned towards the interested room. "Margaret's put Hilda into the second eleven! Isn't it topping! A Four B girl—and a new one at that! Cheers for Hilda!" No one could be more wholehearted than Biddy

in admiration and enthusiasm—the inconsistency of her cheers did not bother her at all in that moment.

"Hurray!" The sitting-room resounded to one cheer, which was as much as the girls dared to venture, and then they crowded round the blushing Hilda. All of them had forgotten that they wanted the Fourth to be "hopeless"; it really seemed quite fine to have something to be proud of again. It was ages since a Four B girl had done anything worth doing.

"Margaret says," went on Hilda, her natural timidity forgotten in excitement, "that there isn't a vacancy in the first eleven at present, but if I work hard and better my form, it's just possible——"

"Look here," broke in Maxime, "I *can't* go on drawing threads out of this wretched tablecloth when such events are happening! Sit down and tell us how you learned to bowl like that, Hilda. When Deborah's stump went—well, you could have knocked me down with a brick! I think it was rather noble of her not to gate you at once and give you an impot for daring to do such a thing! As long as we've known the historical past of the Lower Fourth such a tremendous event has never, never happened—no, *never*!"

"Oh, of course, I could never have done it again," replied Hilda earnestly. "It was just taking her by surprise. She'd know that ball another time —even if I could do it. It was my uncle who took me in hand——"

She went on modestly to explain her success, and then the girls insisted on giving her varied and

emphatic instructions for the sewing on of her patch, which was to act as a pocket on the pale blue linen overall in which Conellan played games.

"For goodness' sake don't lose it!" exclaimed Rona Moore, eyeing it with reverence. "There has never been such a curiosity in Four B before, and there's never likely to be again!"

"Lose it!" Hilda laughed happily. "No, I don't think I should be *quite* so silly as that, though I'm always getting into trouble at home over forgetting things and losing them. I'm going right away to put it in my coat pocket in the cloak-room —then I shall remember to sew it on my overall. There's a blazer as well, Margaret says. I'm to play in a trial match against the first eleven next Saturday!"

She hurried from the room, while the Fourth returned to their tasks, secretly a little discontented, wishing for the moment that, in spite of everything, they, too, were playing up for Conellan.

The Night Owls, with thoughts of Monday's feast, felt extremely disconsolate when the gentle patter of rain sounded once more on the tents that night and greatly relieved when morning revealed a glorious sun rapidly drying up the dampness. As for the rest of Conellan, they had now grown so used to sleeping in the open air that rain, great or small, made little difference to them. To hear it pattering down on the canvas only a few feet above their heads only made them nestle more snugly in their blankets, knowing that the stout tents would defy all storms. There was no doubt, Miss Demsford acknowledged, that, in spite of a few days of rain, the health of Conellan had never

been better. Pale cheeks were brightening and all the girls seemed to take pleasure in the open-air surroundings of their bedrooms.

Monday turned out to be a wonderful day, and the hearts of the Night Owls, with one exception, went up with a bound. The one exception belonged to Biddy, who, no matter how hard she tried to drive it away, still felt that unexplained uneasiness about the adventure.

As she and Maxime and Hilda happened to forgather in the queue for buns and milk, they noticed that Hilda looked pale and serious, and Maxime ventured in a guarded whisper: "Hullo, Hilda! —have you decided not to come to the feast after all?"

Hilda looked at her with a straight gaze. "No, Maxime, I'm coming."

Biddy broke in abruptly. "Look here, Hilda, if you'd really rather not come, I'll let you off your promise."

For a moment Hilda hesitated longingly and then replied, with an effort: "No, Biddy—I promised and I'll come. I know it's very nice of you to ask me."

"Hurry along, girls," said a prefect impatiently, and there was no chance of further conversation.

Everything that night seemed propitious for the venture. The evening was calm and clear, and Angela, having been kept awake with earache the night before, declared herself "dying of sleep," and only wished she were going to bed when the juniors retired. "The Pair" had managed to convey the signal which told of a hoard waiting

down by the hedge. In fact, "life was going," Maxime said, "like a song."

They had grown, all save Hilda, quite used to the process of creeping out of their tents without disturbing anyone, and Hilda, quiet and pale, but quite composed, managed as well as the boldest. She even began, by the time they were well on the way to the island, to take a real interest and enjoyment in the expedition.

The journey across the water in the old punt, the walk through the silent wood, the revelation of the secret cave at the bottom of the "quarry," thrilled her through. She was able at last to reply quite truthfully with enthusiasm to the girls' constant exclamations: "Oh, Hilda, *aren't* you glad you came?"

"It's a simply lovely place!" she breathed, gazing around when they reached the cave. "How romantic it looks with all the clever things you've done!"

"Squat down on this couch," commanded Biddy, who, as usual, had taken command and was beginning thoroughly to enjoy herself. "We're going to have a really chef-fish repast this time. Cooking!—real bacon in a real frying-pan! Good solid eggs! Now then, Maxime—it's your turn to gather wood!"

Soon a cheerful little fire was burning amongst the boulders outside the entrance to the cave.

"Lucky thing this can't be seen from the mainland!" remarked Maxime, as she trotted to and fro with sticks. "What a sensation it would cause in Forford! I wonder if Angela is dreaming of us now. I should like to know what Angela dreams

of when she makes those funny noises! If she's just turning over and groaning now, it must be because she sees us——"

"My dear infant," broke in Rona, making a snatch at some pieces of wood, "if you put them so near the fire you'll have a conflagration that will spread all over the county. You might as well put an advertisement in the paper that the Night Owls meet here on particular nights. *Do* think instead of talking so much!"

"Can't I do something?" inquired Hilda, and was met at once with a ready chorus: "Rather!"

"Look here," said Hazel, "you open these two condensed milk tins. The tin-opener's a bit wonky, but you'll have to manage. Maxime ordered six tins of condensed milk in case we couldn't get any more when we came again. We'd better only use the two now."

Biddy was busily cutting away at the rind of very thick rashers of bacon. "That fire will *have* to do now!" she broke in. "I'm simply longing to start on this bacon!" She proceeded to the fire and a sizzle soon arose, together with a delicate odour of fried food, which brought joy to the waiting company.

Considerably smoke-dried and heated, she announced five minutes later that the bacon was done beautifully, but that anyone who wanted eggs would jolly well have to cook them themselves.

"It requires a big intellect to cook bacon," she declared, "and it wears one out. I mustn't overdo it!"

"I'll beat up the eggs!" volunteered Grace.

"I'll make an omelette." Six eggs were broken up and beaten two at a time in the enamel mugs. By the time the bacon had been eaten, a somewhat blackened and yet underdone mass was served up amongst the six girls. It was eaten with penny teaspoons and voted delicious.

"We must be practically *starved* at school, you know," remarked Maxime earnestly, as they completed the meal with bread, biscuits, jam, condensed milk, cake and cocoa. "If not we should never be able to manage all this grub in the middle of the night. It's awful to think what our insides go through when we just sleep all the night without food! No wonder we feel faint in the morning —it's just that which makes it so hard to get up!"

"Well, it will be something different that will make it hard to get up to-morrow!" laughed Biddy, as she surveyed the remains—small—of the feast. "We'd better clear up now."

"Oh, *do* let's have a rest!" exclaimed Hazel, dreamily. "It's just delicious lying here on these couches, and seeing the firelight flickering outside on the branches all so softly and——"

"Mercy!" broke in Rona. "You're making me feel awfully sleepy! Biddy, couldn't we have just *ten* minutes rest? There's plenty of time!"

"Oh, all right," agreed Biddy reluctantly, but suddenly too sleepy herself to make much protest. Hilda was already dropping with drowsiness. The comfort of the cave was irresistible. The six girls snuggled down on the cushions and pine needles, and in spite of their good intentions went soundly to sleep.

There is no knowing at what terrible hour they might have awakened if a queer sound outside and a pungent smell in her nostrils had not roused Biddy with a start.

She sat up abruptly, looked at her wrist-watch and gave an exclamation of horror. "Girls! *Girls!*" she cried, springing upon the others and shaking them violently. "Wake up! Wake up! It's awful! We've been asleep nearly an hour! Hurry up, do!"

The others woke in alarm, rubbing their eyes and getting sleepily to their feet.

"But the first bell hasn't——" mumbled Maxime, still half-asleep, and then suddenly Rona sniffed the air anxiously.

"M'm! M'm! What's that? Funny smell of burning!"

They hurried out. The fire had died out, but a heavy smoke hung over all. They hunted about anxiously.

"Here it is, under these leaves!" proclaimed Grace at last. "We never put out the fire, and it's been creeping along——"

"Oh, and it's all smouldering here!" cried Hilda, in alarm.

"Oh, we *must* get it out somehow!" Biddy's face was worried. "And it's late, too! All hands to the river—mugs—kettles—anything will do!"

It was no easy matter to put out a fire which, although it had no flame and very little heat, had already spread under the leaves to an alarming extent. There were only small things available for carrying water and the river was some distance.

However, they worked with all their might. The boulders had in many places stopped the fire, and by stamping hard and pouring down as much water as they could get hold of, the girls really did succeed in extinguishing the fire entirely. They realized the seriousness of the position. They had been told often of the necessity for stamping out any picnic fire after use, because of the danger to woods and grass, but, in the way of youth, had taken little notice of this until experience brought it home.

When the last smoulder was out they took great pains to scatter fresh dried leaves on the spot, so that after a night's rain nothing would be left to show that there had been intruders. Luckily the boughs and ivy which shielded the cave had not been damaged—in fact, the fire had never left the ground.

At last they paused, wearied out, blackened and smoke-begrimed.

"We shall simply *have* to stay to wash," said Biddy, biting her lip. "It's an awful hour—but we *must* do that—and we must wipe some of this mud off our shoes, too. Luckily the ground was muddy going down to the tents."

They washed in the river; not daring to spare any time for the washing up of their "crockery," they piled it in the corner of the cave. Rona looked at her wrist-watch. The hour was so late as to frighten them.

Biddy gave a last look at the outside of the cave as they let the ivy fall. "No one will spot anything now," she said hurriedly. "We shall just have to *fly*!"

They hurried down to the water, Biddy and Rona behind. Quickly they pushed off the punt and ferried across the silent river. As they hastened up the opposite bank, Biddy felt her foot tread on something small and soft. "What's this?" she exclaimed, stooping. "Anything we've dropped?"

"Oh, it's only a bit of rag or a hanky or something!" cried Rona impatiently. "*Don't* stop to light matches, Biddy! I'm simply scared to death we shan't get back in time!"

Biddy was scared, too, and so were the rest of the daring Night Owls. It was six very worried and weary girls who half-ran, half-dragged themselves on the way back to Conellan.

Biddy, in particular, felt more nervous than she had ever done over the previous expeditions, for these delays had brought back with greater force the premonition of the past few days. Suppose that this one night, of all nights, should witness their downfall, with Hilda one of the band!

The dawn was breaking greyly when they crept into the field where the tents stood. If the slightest noise had roused one of the sleeping prefects, there was now no sheltering darkness to hide the returning girls. Suppose——!

But, with the wariness of fear, the truants were able to creep under the flap into their tents without arousing a soul. The tent pegs were swiftly pushed back into their places and six breathless girls slipped off their mackintoshes and wrapped their blankets thankfully around them.

At last they were safe!

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING IN THE WIND!

TOURNAMENT day was quite an institution at Conellan. It was entirely a "home" affair, with no visitors, and the taking part in it was a voluntary matter. However, there was never any lack of competitors, for though the tournament prizes were small, the excitement was great. Lists were posted up a few weeks beforehand in the hall, and the notice-board was generally surrounded by an eager group. Part of the tournament took place in the open and the latter part in the big school hall. It included joists in swimming, running, reciting, egg-and-spoon races, memory tests, and all kinds of varied events. The girls were entirely responsible for carrying it through, and the mistresses, who came as guests, enjoyed the event as much as any of the competitors.

The lists had been up for a little time now. On the first day the Lower Fourth, crowding round it eagerly, had pelted one another with the usual remarks: "Oh, are you going in for that? What about the swimming-race? Joyce ought to compete for the fancy-dress thing!" Then, after a look at Biddy's grim face, Four B had suddenly subsided and melted quietly away.

It met later in gym, and filled in the time of waiting

for the visiting gym mistress in discussing the situation and arriving at a decision. Every one, of course, as usual, regarded Biddy expectantly.

"What are we going to do about the tournament, Biddy?" inquired Maxime anxiously.

Biddy bent her brows moodily and then turned her straight, defiant smile upon the waiting form.

"Boycott the whole thing!" she announced.

"Oh!" There were murmurs of mournful consternation from her followers—and yet the decision was really only what it had expected, and the Fourth was loyally prepared to fall in with it.

"You don't mean not *any* of us to go in for *anything* at all, Biddy?" exclaimed Rona.

"That's just what I do mean, of course," returned Biddy briskly.

"I suppose it *is* the only thing to do," acknowledged Maxime reluctantly.

"But surely—couldn't we just join in one teeny-weeny way?" temporized Hazel. "I mean, just one event each—say you for the running and Maxime for the reciting and——"

"Look here," broke in Biddy. "Did we or did we not decide to stand out against the prefects and give them a rough time, to register our protests against the way they've treated us?"

"Yes, *rather*!" came the unmistakable chorus.

"Well, then," continued the Four B leader doggedly, "which will have the greatest effect, do you think—several of us going in for the tournament, so that simply no one will notice whether the Lower Fourth is out or not, or every single one of us standing out and having nothing to do with it?"

"Standing out altogether, Biddy," returned the Fourth Form, subdued and convinced. "Every one will wonder then!"

Mollified by their agreement, Biddy proceeded to enlarge upon the theme, and the form, eager to show that they were hers to the death, grew enthusiastic over the boycott. Only for one brief moment had they looked back towards the flesh-pots of Egypt —anxious to have their cake and yet eat it—to continue to be the worst form in the school and yet to share the fun and prizes of the tournament.

"It will just madden them!" declared Maxime joyously. "Sometimes it really does seem difficult to think of things to make prefects mad, but this really *will*!"

"P'raps they won't take any notice of it," put in a quiet little voice. But the Fourth pretended carefully not to have heard the remark of Hilda Young. It was just the sort of silly thing she would say. Of course, the prefects would notice it! They might act all the time as though the Lower Fourth did not matter a farthing, but when they found they were simply going to stand out of the tournament they might be sorry for what they'd done. And then when they found the Fourth would not give way—and, of course, they could not make them—the prefects would be mad as hatters!

Biddy had heard and noticed Hilda's remark, although she had not replied. As they put away their rubbers in the cloak-room after gym, she managed to say quietly and somewhat coldly: "Are *you* going to enter for the tournament, Hilda?"

Hilda turned a pale, disturbed face upon her

and hesitated. Biddy had been very friendly towards her since she had joined in the expedition to the cave, although she had quite acquiesced in Hilda's determination never to go again.

" I don't know *what* to do," faltered Hilda. " It's so difficult—I never thought school would be like this. I'd love to join in it, really—it's my first term and I'd heard about the tournament and I had so looked forward to it. And—and—Biddy "—Hilda got the words out with a rush—" I don't agree with boycotting it. I—I think it's rotten—and silly ! " Tears trembled in Hilda's eyes. " And yet, if I don't stand in with you all, you'll think I'm disloyal and superior—especially you—and you'll all hate me ! "

Biddy flushed and drew herself up sharply. Hilda *did* intend to break away, then. " Oh, if you *want* to join, there's nothing to stop you, you know. *We* don't care ! You'll be the only one ! "

" I know ! " Hilda struggled with a lump in her throat. " Oh, Biddy, I don't know *what* to do ! I—I'm so fond—I do like you so—and yet I came here meaning to keep straight. Oh, I do want to play up for the school ! "

Biddy's face hardened and her lip curled. " That doesn't sound exactly original ! And seeing that we've had it made plain that no one trusts us in the least to play up for the school, I should have thought you'd have more pride——"

" Oh, what does it matter what they think ? " broke in Hilda, in a thin, unstrung little voice. " I know what *I* want to do—and—and what *I* think's fair ! "

Then, before Biddy could speak again, the small,

agitated girl had fled into the inner room, and was splashing about wildly in one of the basins, as though washing were her greatest desire. But Biddy knew as well as though she had been told that Hilda was crying with all her might.

Biddy sought the form-room with her young, pretty face wrapped in gloom.

A week or two later Olive Gunnell entered Four B form-room with a notebook, a pencil and an apologetic smile.

"Could you possibly spare the girls for a moment, please, Miss Scallon?" she asked. "I want names for the tournament."

"Certainly, Olive," returned the form mistress graciously. "I shall be very much interested to see this tournament. It will be my first experience. Speak to the girls yourself."

"It's a queer mix-up of things," laughed Olive, in explanation, "but very jolly. Apart from age and so on, we let every one enter who wishes, whether there's a chance of their winning or not, so we have crowds of entries." She turned over the pages of her notebook. Four B always required plenty of space, being of a fairly confident nature and always eager to put its oar in anything exciting.

"The first race down is the egg-and-spoon race." Olive addressed the class in a businesslike manner. "Now what entries for that? Hands up!"

She looked round expectantly, but to her surprise not a single hand went up. "No eggs and spoons?" she said. "Oh, well, who's for the next—the swimming race for the lower school—same length as last year?"

Her pencil was poised—but there was nothing to record. Olive began to look faintly puzzled. "No swimmers? Then we come to some music and art mixed up in the jumble. Best pencil sketch of Conellan girls in action! Best rendering of a duet! Best recitation!"

Still no hands went up. An astonished frown gathered on Olive's brow. As she read out event after event without gaining any response whatever, the triumphant Four B girls could see from her face that the facts of the case were becoming evident to the prefect. However, they continued in defiant silence as Olive, giving up comments, merely read on with the list of happenings. She concluded with the announcement: "A comic fancy-dress obstacle race."

Still silence! Olive looked up from her notebook with narrowed eyes and grim face. "Then there's really not a single event sufficiently interesting for the Lower Fourth to deign to take part!"

The girls of Four B looked at each other and then away with sulky, defiant and not too charming faces, and then, as Olive was about to shut her notebook with a snap, a small, slight form sprang up in the back row.

"Oh, *please*, Olive—I should like to enter, please!"

Olive glanced up quickly. "Let's see, you're the new girl, Hilda Young. Good! Which event do you wish to enter for, Hilda?"

Hilda stammered. "Oh, the last one, please!" She did not know or care which was the last event—she could only think of the fact that

there was just one moment in which to make her stand.

Olive's grimness relapsed into an odd smile as she surveyed the small, agitated figure. "The comic fancy-dress obstacle race? Very well, Hilda."

This time she really closed her book, and with thanks to Miss Scallon and not another glance for the boycotting Fourth, took her way from the room.

Miss Scallon annoyedly viewed a sulky, silent Lower Fourth. Hilda was diving into her desk to hide her flushed cheeks.

"What is the meaning of this, girls?" she said at last. Miss Scallon, being a new-comer, not well acquainted with Conellan procedure and anxious, too, to leave the girls as free a hand as possible in the new self-government scheme, tried to avoid even the appearance of interference with matters outside school hours. But this attitude on the part of the Lower Fourth towards the great tournament was too extraordinary to be ignored. "What *is* the meaning of this?"

She eyed Biddy, who rose, not too brightly, to her feet.

"We just don't care to join in, Miss Scallon, that's all," she said stiffly. "There's no rule that we should, you know."

"There's no rule, certainly," said the form mistress. "And no doubt the loss is your own. But there is a lack of public spirit about this form which I have been disappointed several times to see, and of which this is only another instance. I don't see it anywhere else in the school and I simply cannot understand it. You have everything to be proud

of in this school and everything to inspire you to play up to its name. Well, Hilda, you must represent the whole of the form at the tournament and pull off a prize."

She said nothing more on the subject, for the tournament was, after all, the girls' affair. At the same time she wished heartily—and this was not the first occasion for wishing—that she could discover what was the canker at the root of Four B.

If the Lower Fourth reckoned on creating a sensation by their refusal to join in the tournament events, they were doomed to disappointment. Indeed, the upper girls could not have discovered a more damping and crushing manner in which to treat the terrible rebellion. Four A were certainly astonished and interested, but the upper school, on whom the blow was intended to have such fearful effects, showed not the faintest signs of chagrin or anxiety. Four B might not have existed, for all the attention shown to their defection by authority. There was no denying that it was annoying. Undoubtedly by cutting off their tournament noses they had spited their faces, while the faces of the Fifth and Sixth continued in imperturbability. And there was the rest of the school happily talking about, planning and training for the great event.

The Lower Fourth, after Hilda's sudden uprising in their midst and manifest protest over the matter of the tournament, had regarded her with considerable coldness. Her winning of the colours had brought her retiring, delicate little personality into some popularity. As a distinguished bowler and " quite a nice sort of kid," and, moreover, as one

whom Biddy evidently regarded with favour, she had felt a distinct atmosphere of friendliness around her in the Lower Fourth, which brought joy indeed to Hilda's timid heart. Now, however, the coldness was unmistakable. Hilda had deliberately set up her own stupid opinions against the decisions of the Lower Fourth, and in her own small person had broken its united front in the face of the enemy.

No one said a word about her entry for the obstacle race—no one asked any question about her costume. Hilda had never worn a fancy dress in her life and was utterly at sea as to how to make one—and particularly a "comic" one! However, she clung to the determination to manage one somehow and to join in the race.

Biddy was conscious more than once of Hilda's appealing eyes turned in her direction, but she persistently ignored them. She felt indignantly angry with Hilda. The girl had no loyalty, she told herself, no gratitude, no *esprit de corps*, no idea of "hanging together." It was not as though they had asked her to do anything questionable, like going to the cave. They hadn't asked her to do anything at all —only to *refrain* from doing something. It would have been easy enough to have let Olive go, instead of jumping up like a Jack-in-the-box at the last minute and making a silly of herself and the Lower Fourth as well. It spoilt the dignity of the whole thing, thought Biddy angrily; she had quite persuaded herself as to the dignity. And really, she had tried to be decent to the kid and had gone out of her way to be friendly. It simply showed that,

although Hilda talked a lot of rubbish about being fond of her, she simply didn't care two——

Biddy halted. Thinking these thoughts for the twentieth time, she had been strolling down reluctantly towards her garden plot, about which she had not bothered for some time. She stared down at it now in amazement.

The plot was neatly weeded, the dead flowers were cut from the delphiniums, the plants watered, the one small rose-tree was carefully tied to a higher stick. It was neat as a pin.

Biddy remembered suddenly that she had met Hilda coming from the garden gate, and that the girl had looked oddly guilty. Now she knew the meaning of that furtive look. Yes, Hilda had realized the trouble that was piling up for Biddy with the garden prefects and had stolen the time from her own plot, which she loved, to put Biddy's in order. Biddy knew it as well as though she had been told. She stood gazing down at the neat garden with a queer look in her eyes, and did not move as two prefects, Pauline Lake and Edna Doone, came down the path talking busily.

" We had a topping ramble last time ! " Edna was saying. " A dozen of us, and we found a lot of specimens on the river-bank. Miss Peters was in charge. It's surprising how many little-known species there are there. We went down the river. Next time we intend to go up-stream, the island way."

" *Up-stream, the island way !* " Biddy had not been paying much attention to the approaching prefects, but these last words struck into her thoughts

like a blow and held her rooted to the spot. The next sentence, however, coming from the other prefect, was even more startling.

"Oh, that's where Deborah has gone to-day," returned Pauline carelessly. "But it's a long way to the river that way and not half so attractive, I think, across those bare fields. She's taken some of the Fifth."

Biddy, with trembling fingers, was busying herself with the tape round the rose-tree, stooping over to hide her crimson face as the two prefects drew near.

"Oh, so you've cleared up your garden, Biddy," said Edna in a cold voice. "You're just in time. There would have been a fuss about it. It's no good undertaking a plot if you're not prepared to take trouble over it and make it decent. See that you keep it looking as it is now, and don't let me have to speak to you about it."

"Yes, Edna," replied Biddy in a low and unusually meek voice, as the two prefects passed on. Her heart was beating fast. Deborah and some of the Fifth had gone up river towards the island!

It was true they were not likely to cross to its shores, for it was strictly forbidden to embark on the treacherous river at any other place than that down river which was reserved for swimming and boating for the school. Because also, as Pauline had said, of the bare fields in between, the up-river part of the stream was rarely patronized. But now Deborah was going there—suppose some accident induced the party to go over to the island! Suppose they found the cave! Suppose——

" Tingerlingerling ! " went the tea bell, and Biddy, feeling decidedly unnerved, hurried into tea.

Prep went by without incident, however, and Biddy was beginning to regard life calmly once more by the time the Lower Fourth was gathered in the sitting-room for a free half-hour before bedtime. The Fourth was in convivial mood and laughter and chatter filled the air.

Upon this scene burst Hazel. She flung in wide-eyed, breathless, consternation in every feature.

Carefully closing the door behind her, she turned on the astonished girls.

" Biddy ! " she gasped, in agitation. " You're wanted in the prefects' room ! "

The room stared. " What *is* the matter, Hazel ? " cried a dozen anxious, alarmed voices. Biddy rose slowly, her eyes on the new-comer, without saying a word.

" I don't know ! " panted Hazel. " I was passing the room when the door opened and Olive put her head out and she said : ' Here's a Four B child —she'll go.' And she told me to fetch Biddy. I couldn't help seeing inside—and oh, girls, they're all sitting round the table as solemn as images—sort of sitting in judgment—and Deborah—oh, she's *angry* ! She's wearing that look—you know ! Oh, Biddy, what *can* it be ? "

" Biddy—it's trouble ! " cried Four B in dismay.

Biddy walked slowly towards the door, with a queer, sickly sensation, her heart thumping wildly.

CHAPTER VII

WONDERS WILL NEVER CEASE!

AS Biddy made her way to the prefects' room in answer to the head girl's peremptory summons, a succession of unnerving possibilities flashed through her mind. But the strongest premonition was the most terrible. *Deborah and the Fifth Form girls on their ramble had discovered the secret cave and its contents.* Some clue had led them to fix on the Lower Fourth, and Biddy in particular, as being responsible. If they really, really had found it all out—Biddy bit hard on her trembling lip—whatever would happen now?

She tried to pull herself together as she reached the prefects' room, but her heart was still thumping so loudly that it seemed they must hear even through the panels. She knocked softly and opened the door as several voices shouted "Come in!"

The prefects of the Sixth were seated round a long narrow table, and a general turning of heads greeted Biddy's entrance. Biddy glimpsed the critical faces as through a kind of mist. She vaguely remembered Hazel's description "solemn as images —sitting in judgment." The only person of whose every look and movement she was fully aware was the tall, slim girl sitting facing her with the table between them, Deborah West.

Deborah was looking towards her now, and her face was more stern than definitely angry. "Ah, Biddy!" she said.

Biddy hesitated, not knowing whether to proceed further.

"Come right in, Biddy," said Deborah, quite quietly. "Stand opposite to me. You girls might move along a little."

Biddy found herself near the table, facing Deborah, the girls on each side regarding her keenly, while those whose backs had been towards the door turned sideways to view her. It was terrible. Biddy felt a lump in her throat, and when she managed to gulp it down the sound seemed to echo through the room.

"I've sent for you, Biddy, to talk to you very seriously," began Deborah.

"Yes, Deborah," Biddy managed to reply faintly.

"There's only one form in the school," went on the head girl, "since we started this new self-government method, which hasn't made the faintest attempt to play up for the school in any direction whatever. In fact"—Deborah paused impressively—"if it didn't seem quite too incredible, we should have thought that the Lower Fourth had deliberately made up its mind to give ten times more trouble than it gave before. But one finds it difficult to believe that of any decent kind of girls. Well, Biddy, we think it's pretty obvious that you set the pace to a great extent in the Lower Fourth, and that's why I sent for you."

"Yes, Deborah," murmured Biddy, even more

faintly than before. If only Deborah would hurry up and get to the cave and not keep her in this suspense!

Deborah's next words, however, were so utterly surprising that Biddy almost started.

"I've no doubt at all that there's really just as much good and loyal material in the Lower Fourth as in any other form in the school. And I am going to give you the chance to prove that I am right." Biddy, staring open-mouthed at Deborah, was only vaguely conscious of various rather grim smiles and shrugs emanating from several of the prefects.

"Now, Biddy, you have a strong influence. You can use it either to make the other girls feel that it is rather wonderful and clever to upset things and make it hard for the prefect's discipline to be carried out, or you can make them feel that the best and jolliest thing is to play up for Conellan. Most of us think that you and the Lower Fourth can be trusted to play up, and we're going to give you a chance to prove we're right. From now on, the Lower Fourth will be self-governing, as is the Upper Fourth—and you are to be a prefect."

Biddy gasped, hardly able to credit her ears. "A—a *prefect*!"

"Head prefect in Four B," returned Deborah. "We propose that you have two other prefects, and that all but yourself take it in turns to occupy the positions. But we leave that in the hands of the form. What we shall look for will be the general tone of the form and its discipline outside school hours. That will show us if our trust has been justified, as I am sure it will be. You will be in the

same position as ourselves and the rest of the Upper School, to prove the stuff you are made of. We suggest Rona Moore and Grace Knoler for the first two prefects. That's all I wanted to say, Biddy."

Biddy blinked and gazed at Deborah, and then down on the table. No words broke the silence.

Gwen Grettell spoke up impatiently. "Well, child, the least you can do is to speak up and thank Deborah; not stand there like a stuffed goose!" What Gwen thought of Deborah's wisdom in her present course was sufficiently evident from the tone of her voice.

But Deborah interposed gently: perhaps she remembered days in Four B more clearly than did Gwen Grettell, and read the signs writ large on Biddy's face.

"I think I understand Biddy all right," she said. "She would like to accept the position and will play up, isn't that so, Biddy?"

Biddy nodded dumbly and blinked again very quickly, and Deborah said: "That's all, then. You can go, child."

Biddy turned and stumbled out, closing the door behind her. She went slowly along the corridor as in a trance, still blinking hard. Then as she reached the door of the deserted music-room, she slipped blindly inside and just round the corner, laid her arms on the top of the old cottage piano and burst into tears. She did not know quite why she was crying—only that she was "worked up inside," and that these tears had been threateningly near the surface now for the last ten minutes. They subsided quickly, and she straightened up and

rubbed her eyes dry with a rather grubby handkerchief and then, still interrupted by little catches of the breath, she tried to remove the traces of tears from the piano with the same handkerchief. No approaching footsteps were audible to her, and she jumped when a kind voice spoke at her elbow.

"Why, what is the matter, Biddy?" And there was Deborah, who had left the prefects' meeting still sitting and was on her way to her study, when she had heard faint sounds quite foreign to piano practice stealing from the music-room. "Why are you crying?"

Biddy slipped the handkerchief into her pocket and tried to look as though there was nothing at all out of the way in having red and rather damp eyes. "I—I'm not crying—I don't know why I'm crying!"

Deborah could not suppress a smile. Then she took the girl by the shoulders and looked straightly down. "Biddy, there's something at the bottom of this business with the Lower Fourth. I've begun to wonder lately if I didn't make a mistake at the beginning. Tell me, child, was Four B upset because we didn't allow it to have its own prefects?"

Biddy nodded—it was still rather difficult to speak.

"You really had intended, if we'd made you self-governing, to turn over a new leaf and play up like the rest of the school?"

"Yes, Deborah," answered Biddy in a shaky voice.

The head girl regarded her in half-kindly, half-impatient despair. "Then why on earth didn't you

say so, my child? I gave the Lower Fourth every chance. I specially asked them if they had anything to say about it themselves. How on earth can I do anything to try and help girls if they won't give me any inkling of what's in their minds? I think I did make a mistake in the whole matter, but it could all have been avoided if only one of you had given us the faintest idea of what was in your minds."

Biddy hung her head. Four B's general course of action and campaigning *did* seem rather foolish and unfair looked at in this light. It seemed impossible to explain why no one had spoken.

"I—I—I don't know, Deborah, why we didn't say——"

"Oh, well!" Deborah dropped her hands and smiled, her pretty grey eyes softening. "It doesn't matter now. It's all over. Run along, Biddy, and bathe your face, and then get to the business of appointing prefects. You can settle the details to-morrow, but you will want to elect prefects now because Angela will not be coming on duty again."

"Are we—are we to sleep alone now?" faltered Biddy, her head whirling.

Deborah nodded, and then turned to go along the corridor. The next moment she felt a hand on her arm, and looked down to meet the wide, earnest gaze of Biddy's red-rimmed eyes.

"Deborah—I—I'm awfully sorry we've been such rotters!"

"Oh, all right!" said Deborah kindly. "Now run along, kiddie."

Biddy ran.

Even after a thorough splash and douche in cold water, Biddy's face undoubtedly gave away the fact that she had been passing through a time of stress, and the look-outs at the door of the sitting-room went forward with anxious whispers.

"Oh, *Biddy*, what *have* they done? Oh, was it very awful?"

Within the room were rising, excited voices. "She's come back—here's Biddy!" Then as one of the look-outs dashed back followed an unmistakable awe-stricken whisper: "She's been *crying*!"

However, Biddy entered with a resolute smile, which aimed rather vainly at carelessness, and faced the alarmed greetings of the Lower Fourth with an armour of lightness.

"Well, here we are, still whole and intact in spite of the avalanche!"

"But what—why—oh, Biddy, do hurry up and tell us why they sent for you!"

Biddy raised her eyebrows with an air of surprise, and then returned rather haughtily: "Why shouldn't they! It was just a prefects' meeting, and they sent for me to make me a prefect!"

A chorus of cynical and hollow laughter greeted this statement, and Maxime cried with impatient anxiety: "Oh, Biddy, do tell us, *really*! It must be something awful—you're just joking because you daren't tell us!"

Biddy looked pained. "I'm surprised at the way you take it. Surely there's nothing extraordinary in my being made a prefect. It really isn't nice of you!" She drew down the corners of her mouth, but her red-rimmed eyes twinkled irresistibly, and

suddenly Hazel, peering forward, announced her discovery in a loud, amazed voice :

" It's true—I do believe it's true ! "

Maxime seized her by the shoulder and shook her excitedly. " Biddy—Biddy, tell us—is it true ? "

Biddy nodded, her eyes shining. The astonished Fourth could not but recognize that this time she was in earnest, and its utter amazement found vent in one loud, concerted outburst :

" *Biddy !* "

Biddy took up her position in front of the closed door. " Yes, girls, I'm to be head prefect, and the first other two, if you agree, are to be Rona Moore and Grace. Angela isn't going to sleep with us to-night, and the Lower Fourth is to be henceforth a self-governing form. And, girls, Deborah is a perfect angel-*brick* ! "

The Lower Fourth certainly slept that night, but it regarded the time as entirely wasted. Its members were caught up in a whirl of emotions—excitement, good resolutions, plans for the future, enthusiasm ; the Lower Fourth when it " went in " for anything did it thoroughly. And it had not needed Biddy's leadership to turn the tide when her report had been given of the events of the prefects' meeting and of Deborah's words in the music-room. There was no time for much discussion before bedtime, but the Lower Fourth agreed that a special meeting should be held after tea the next day.

At one moment the Fourth was thrilled with a sense of freedom and somewhat exaggerated ideas of its new responsibilities and privileges ; at the next it hesitated to take a solitary step beyond those

previously allowed it, quite uncertain as to how far its powers extended.

Biddy was just darting out of the stationery-room the next morning, whither she had been sent by Miss Scallon for a supply of blotting-paper, when she cannoned violently into the head girl and pulled herself up with a shocked apology.

"All right," smiled Deborah. "Well, how are things going?"

"Splendid!" stammered Biddy. "Oh, Deborah, I wanted to ask you. We are going to have a meeting about it. Can we go and have it in the paddock, or do we have to ask permission to use the form-room out of school hours, or do we have to have our meeting in the prefects' room?"

"Not in the *prefects'* room, child," said Deborah, trying to suppress a smile. "And you can have it anywhere you like, and ask only your own permission, provided, of course, you don't break school rules or inconvenience any other form."

"Oh, *thank* you, Deborah," answered the new Fourth Form prefect very seriously, and walked away with a profound feeling of responsibility. Fancy being able to make one's own rules about the form-room and everything. . . .

The meeting was held in the paddock after tea in the shade of the beeches, with the sun streaming over the heights of them and turning the grass orange and gold.

It was entirely different from any other meeting the Lower Fourth Form had ever held before. There was about it a new air of dignity, of responsibility. It was also noticeable that some attempt by a few

members of the usual Fourth Form lightness of treatment was quickly squashed.

" We'll sit in a ring," said Biddy, as she squatted upon the grass. " Now we must have all our rules set out properly. I've got an exercise-book from Miss Scallon, and I want some one to write down the rules and sort of minutes of the meeting. Hilda, I guess you're the neatest writer in this form ; come and sit at the side of me. Here's a pencil."

Hilda Young, the happiest look upon her face which Conellan had ever seen there, came forward shyly.

" First of all," went on the new head prefect, " there are some general rules we shall have to make each other keep. Margaret called me into the prefects' room this morning and gave them to me." She read them out amid a respectful silence. " Now we'd better settle about prefects. I suppose I shall have to be the first head prefect because Deborah has arranged it that way, but I don't want to be always head. I vote I keep it for a week, and then we elect some one else."

A chorus of dissent greeted this proposal. " Oh, no, Biddy, we want *you* to be head all the time. We don't want another head prefect ! "

" Besides," Maxime put in sagely, hugging her knees and thinking deeply, " if we *did* elect some one else—and you couldn't get us to do that, anyway, because we'd all rather have you—but even if we *did* it would all come to the same thing. Whoever might be called head prefect, you'd be running the show, really."

" In a nutshell, Max," approved Grace. " Really,

we want you to be head, Biddy, and I'm sure Deborah does."

"Oh, all right!" yielded Biddy. It was impossible to resist some gratification at the universal verdict of Four B. "Well, now we come to Rona and Grace for the first prefects. Anyone dissenting?"

"No fear!" Hazel voiced the general feeling on the matter, and as all hands showed up to vote for the new prefects, their names and that of Biddy were entered solemnly into the new book by the nervous but thrilled hand of Hilda.

"Put yourself in as—oh, as secretary, I suppose," added Biddy. "Now, the first thing we have to agree is that prefects have jolly well got to *be* prefects, and not to be soft-hearted because girls are their friends, when they ought to lose marks. And the girls ought to take notice of the prefects without making them feel mean and uncomfortable, and not expect even their dearest chum to pass anything over. I've noticed that about girls: they do get upset if a friend reports them or anything, and I don't think they ought to, and that's one thing boys are better at than girls. So let's get that clear."

"Oh, Biddy, that's awfully true!" exclaimed Maxime enthusiastically. "I know I shall feel simply terrible if you give me a bad mark—but I'll try not to, honestly I will. And I shall hate obeying Grace even about the simplest thing—but I will, *really*!"

"We're not going to start ordering people about all the time, you cuckoo!" exclaimed Rona. "And, anyway, you'll have your turn later and be prefect over us. I don't think it's half so bad as being

ordered about by a prefect who doesn't know anything about things really, and just forgets what life is in Four B."

Altogether, the first executive meeting of the self-governing Lower Fourth proceeded in the excellent atmosphere of good resolutions.

When the business was over, Biddy rose resolutely to her feet and addressed the ring of reclining girls. The Night Owls had had very little chance for private confab, but had arrived roughly at their course of action.

" There's one thing we ought to say. Everybody in the form knows that five of us have had a secret on ; and most of you guess we've formed a secret society. I know everybody's been dying of curiosity about it, and we've told you lots of times that in the end we meant to let you all into it in turn. But this alters things, of course. We shall have to drop our society and what we used to do, and we think we'd better not tell you anything about it, and then you won't get into trouble if it should come out at any time."

Her speech called forth a chorus of expostulations from every one but the Night Owls and Hilda. " Oh, Biddy, *do* tell us—we've been frightfully keen to know ! What does it matter ; how *can* it matter now you're stopping it all ? "

But Biddy was obdurate, and so were the rest of the Night Owls, appeal being made to them. Eventually the subject was dropped for more discussion of the future, and then the first public self-governing meeting of the Lower Fourth was declared closed.

The members of the Night Owls lingered behind

by unspoken consent, while the rest of the form made its way towards the garden.

"I suppose we *must* give it up?" sighed Maxime mournfully. She made a question of her remark, but the answer had already been sorrowfully supplied, even in her own mind.

"Of course we must," returned Biddy impatiently. "Don't be absurd, Maxime!"

"Well, I can't help thinking of that gorgeous cave and the lovely times we've had there, and how we shall never see it again!" lamented Maxime.

"Well, you're not the only one to think of it!" exclaimed Rona. "It's no worse for you than it is for us! I could howl and stand on my head!"

"And four tins of condensed milk simply not touched!" sighed Hazel.

Grace was looking thoughtful. "I suppose, really, if we're turning over a new leaf, we ought to own up all about it!"

Biddy knit her brows. "Well, *I* don't know," she said at length. "I've meditated deeply on the subject. I suppose we ought to in a way, but, of course, there'd be the most awful, terrible row, and the Lower Fourth would simply go smash; and as for new leaves, my infants, there wouldn't be any turning of *them*. Besides, we did it when we'd declared war, and the Sixth knows we've jolly well done lots of things, and I suppose they gave us this chance to wipe them out. Look here, let's do the new leaf business and when—sometime—I mean, when we've sort of shown them that we really have turned it, then—perhaps—then we might go to Deborah and tell."

The Night Owls, with a little shiver at the very thought, agreed. Biddy's reasoning, however, whatever its merits, had the virtue of chiming in with their own desires. Undoubtedly, if their night adventures were ever told, there would be a simply *awful* row!

CHAPTER VIII

A TERRIBLE RISK

"OH!" Hilda suddenly sprang to her feet with an exclamation of dismay, and the Lower Fourth, spending a few minutes before tea in reclining on the grass and watching the tennis practice of the great ones of the Fifth, looked round with pained eyebrows.

"How noisy you are!" murmured Rona Moore. "One so often has to complain of your rough and unbecoming conduct. But what's the matter—some awful tragedy occurred?"

"Oh, I've just remembered!" gasped Hilda. "It's the first cricket match to-morrow and I haven't —*actually*—I haven't sewn on my colours! I have got a simply awful memory! I've been thinking and thinking of the match—and yet I forgot my colours weren't on!"

"You must be a genius, Hilda," replied Biddy lazily. "I don't think I ever met anyone so absent-minded as you are! Well, you'd better go along and get the pocket now. You can go and get your overall, too, from the annex and put it in the sitting-room till after tea, and then sew the thing on. With a sad case like yours, the only course is to do a thing just when you think of it."

"Thanks, Biddy," said Hilda, running up to-

wards the house. How could she have forgotten so important a matter! She hastened into the cloak-room and plunged her hand into the pocket of the coat which hung up on one of her pegs. The expected badge was not there, however, and Hilda felt hurriedly in the big pocket on the other side. But still there was no badge to be felt.

A slightly anxious expression clouded Hilda's face. "It must be in the first one," she murmured, and fumbled inside again.

But there was certainly nothing to be felt of the badge. Hilda's brows knit as she dived again into the other pocket. Then she stood back.

"It isn't there! But it *must* be!" Her mackintosh hung at the side, and she felt quickly in its pocket, though without hope, for she knew quite well that she had placed the colours in her big coat. The mackintosh search proved fruitless, and now a chilly feeling was creeping over the unfortunate seeker.

"But it simply can't be lost—it *can't* be!" she said aloud, and proceeded to search the cloak-room thoroughly. But there was no sign or trace of a small five-cornered badge of blue linen bearing the precious and coveted insignia of the Second Eleven of Conellan.

Hilda straightened up at last, with white lips. There was no longer any shadow of doubt. The badge was gone.

The tea bell rang and Hilda was obliged to abandon the search and hurry into the dining-hall. As she took her seat next to Rona Moore, the girl glanced up quickly.

"What is the matter, Hilda?" she asked.

Hilda had only just time to pass on the bare fact that the badge was missing when Deborah announced from the head table: "Only French now, girls, please." And Hilda's mind was too much agitated by her loss to allow of her putting the story into coherent French.

On the way to the nets, however, for a practice before prep, Hilda hurried after Biddy to break the news.

"Lost it!" echoed Biddy, pausing in the midst of her companions. "But how on earth can you have lost it? Didn't you go straight away with it and put it in your coat in the cloak-room?"

Hilda nodded anxiously. "And I've not worn the coat since, either. So what *can* have happened, Biddy?" Her voice was piteous.

"I expect you put it into your mac instead of your coat," suggested one of the girls.

"No, I didn't; I know quite well I put it straight into my coat. And anyway, I looked in my mac —every pocket—and it isn't there—and all over the cloak-room, too."

Biddy gazed at her with gathering dismay.

"I say, Hilda, if you really have lost those colours, I don't know whatever you'll do! There'll be the most awful fuss. Margaret will say, of course, that you ought to have put them on before or stowed them away safely. Deborah will be awfully annoyed!"

"Perhaps they'll say you can't be in the Eleven after all!" cried Maxime, a helpful Job's comforter. "It's such an honour that they are frightfully

particular about badges and things, and about being early—why, there was a girl once—a Fifth Form girl, too—and she turned up five minutes late—you remember her, Biddy—a tall girl with cheeks that you could see behind when she laughed—very nice she was, though ; and Deborah said——"

"It's what Deborah will say *now*, that matters ! " broke in Biddy grimly. "Look here, we must just search everywhere that Hilda may by any possibility have put the thing. It's no good looking only in likely places. We'll have a jolly good hunt round before prep. Maxime, you and Rona go and look round the tent—it might have got caught in the blankets or somewhere like that. Hilda, come along to the annex, and we'll go through your locker and things, if you like, together."

The search parties set off, though Hilda declared despairingly that it was not a bit of good looking anywhere else, for she knew with absolute certainty that she had put the badge in her coat pocket.

"Well, my child, it must be somewhere ! " said Biddy. "And there's no one in this form who's likely to have taken it—so come along and don't be a Jeremiah ! "

However, the most diligent search produced no result, and when the prep bell sounded the Lower Fourth filed in looking extremely worried. It felt this to be a personal, almost a national, calamity. As for Hilda, the words danced before her eyes, and vainly she tried to concentrate on the lesson in hand. The match was fixed for to-morrow, and her colours had disappeared.

"Don't worry," had been Biddy's last words as they went in. "We've all to-morrow morning. We'll manage to find it yet, without letting anyone know it's been lost."

Biddy found herself turning over the problem instead of absorbing the facts of a famous reign. "It's so difficult with a kid like Hilda," she thought. "She's quite positive that she put the thing in her coat, but it's quite likely that she took it out and put it somewhere else for safety and has forgotten every word about it. No one but Hilda would leave the Second Eleven colours for a whole week without sewing them on!" She tried to follow out Hilda's possible course. "Now, I wonder if she put them into her mac afterwards, thinking she'd leave them in the annex with her overall, or put them in the drawers in the tent. But then they'd still be in her mac. She's only just used it to come to and fro. She hasn't been for walks in it, or thrown it down anywhere. It's not been out of——"

Suddenly Biddy's thoughts came to a startled halt, as though they had confronted something utterly unexpected and were shrinking back with a thrill of premonition.

"*The cave!*"

What had Hilda worn when she went out with the Night Owls, scrambling over stiles and up river banks and over boulders in the middle of the night? How easily might anything in the pocket of her mackintosh have been lost during that cross-country dash to get to the tents in time! Supposing Hilda *had* transferred the badge from

her coat to the mackintosh, meaning to take it to the tent and afterwards forgetting all about it—it would have been still in the pocket when she slipped on her mackintosh over her pyjamas.

Then again Biddy started, and this time with unmistakable horror. She remembered hurrying up the bank of the river and feeling her foot touching something small, loose, soft and light. Stooping over it in the first hint of dawn, she had said hastily : " What's this—anything we've dropped ? " And Rona had dragged her on impatiently, crying : " Oh, it's only a bit of rag or hanky, or something ! Don't stop, Biddy ! "

But now Biddy knew with terrible certainty what the " rag " had been. Hilda's precious badge —the colours of Conellan's Second Eleven—lay by the river-bank far out of school bounds for any eye to see !

The rest of preparation time passed for Biddy like a terrible dream. Never in all her young life had she faced a problem and a fear like this. The affair had ceased to be simply a question of the " row " waiting for Hilda if she failed to produce her colours next day. Far more vital things were now involved. That lost badge was like a live bomb which might explode at any moment and finish Hilda's career, at least. At any moment some one might pick up that badge and bring it to Conellan, or a party of Conellan girls such as must have passed near it only a few days ago would find it, miles away from bounds, and know that it could only belong to one girl. Biddy shivered.

Suppose they confessed everything now—Hilda

would confess, too, or if she did not, with the cave no longer a secret, the badge was more than ever likely to be found. Still Hilda would not be saved.

Biddy was glad that there was no free time that evening, so that she had not to keep up a flow of talk with her chums, and at supper she contrived to sit between Paula and Irene Gamet, who were noted as the Silent Sisters. She did not want to discuss this with anyone until she had thought it out herself. She was glad and yet afraid when "Lights out!" was called, and she was left alone in the gathering darkness to face the problem again.

"It's all my fault!" thought Biddy miserably. For the first time in her life she saw with clearness the other side of what she had termed "fun" and "spirit." She saw what it had meant and might mean to Hilda that she had been drawn away from the "keeping straight" on which she had been determined. She knew that she had worked on Hilda's feelings of affection to induce her to do something which the girl hated and which was against her principles. She knew that if she, Biddy, had only left her alone, Hilda would have been quite happy and contented and successful in school life, and would have been able to help her people by gaining a scholarship. And now—there seemed nothing but disgrace ahead.

As the camp grew quite still, and Biddy lay staring with wide eyes into the darkness, more and more she felt the growing conviction that in her hands and hers alone lay the saving of Hilda.

The late moon was beginning to break through the darkness when at length a movement became

apparent in Biddy's corner of the tent. A small form crept from its blankets, stealthily secured its mackintosh and, pulling up two tent pegs from the skirt of the tent, crept out into the night.

Biddy had made up her mind. It was her " job " to win back that badge and make Hilda safe from disgrace. To do this, she had not only to break the agreement with the Night Owls that the cave was never to be visited again, but she was also to violate the implicit pledges she had given when Deborah's trust had made her prefect. Biddy's face was pale and set, and dark rings under her eyes told of the conflict which had waged through the vigil of the night.

After one cautious glance round, Biddy had taken to her heels as soon as she had left the tents behind, and was now putting out with all speed for the island. She had no uncertainty as to the danger and risks of the course she was taking. Discovery simply as leader of the Night Owls would have been terrible enough, but now she was a prefect deliberately taking advantage, it would appear, of the trust placed in her, to break all the rules of the school.

Biddy shivered, in spite of the warmth of the night, as she hurried on.

She reached the bank of the river at last and scrambled down the bank as nearly as could be judged to where she had ascended on the fatal night. She peered here and there in the dim moonlight, but no glimpse of a blue pocket rewarded her anxious gaze. The matches she struck went out feebly, and she decided to cross to the cave and

secure one of the candles. It was the first night she had ever crossed alone, and, in spite of the absorption of her errand, the eerie echoing splash of the paddle over the quiet water made her start, though there was nothing but shadows to be seen. Quickly she tied up the boat and hurried through the wood and down into the cave. Then she struck a match and bent over the biscuit-tin in which the candles had been stowed.

The next moment she had started back with a quick exclamation. The lid was off the tin and only half its contents remained. Of these were two candles, and with hands that trembled strangely, Biddy lit one of these and held it above her head.

Then as she stared round the cave her heart began to beat bumpily and her breath came fast.

Some one had been in the cave.

Two empty condensed milk tins which the girls had left unopened stood in the middle of the floor. The " crockery " piled up in the corner was scattered, and a biscuit and a cup containing the remains of cocoa stood by the tin. There were cocoa stains on one of the bright cushions, and the pine needles and larch branches were untidily bunched together into one couch.

An enamel plate on the top of the second biscuit-box bore the remains of a meal—a chop-bone and a broken crust of bread.

Biddy lowered the candle, and it was almost extinguished by the shaking of her hand. She seemed now to hear movements in the wood outside, the crackling of branches, stealthy footsteps.

She blew out the candle and crept into the quarry, crouching there motionless.

After all, however, the sounds were entirely in her imagination, born of that strange discovery of a visitor. There was no one in the wood or the quarry. The night was absolutely still. Nevertheless, Biddy hurried from the cave as silently as possible, an inexplicable panic hastening her footsteps, and pushed off the boat with all speed. She drew a deep breath of relief as she stepped out on the opposite bank and turned towards the island. Still silence there!

Now she was able once more to think coherently of her errand. She lit the candle and, shielding it with her hand, hunted about on the bank.

The next moment she gave a stifled cry of joy.

The colours!

She held them up to the candlelight. Oh, fortune!—the badge was untorn and clean save for a little patch in the corner where Biddy had touched it and kicked it into the grass on the feast night. It was a trifle damp with dew, but that was nothing.

Almost laughing with delight, Biddy pushed the colours carefully into her mackintosh pocket and set off at a run for the camp.

The moon was coming out clearly from behind the clouds and the countryside was flooded with light. Biddy traversed the field with determined though weary feet. At the third stile from camp an accident for a moment brought her heart into her throat as the top bar of the stile gave way suddenly with a loud crack which seemed to echo through the night. The bar had always been rotten.

Biddy, just saving herself from a fall, scolded herself for the foolish misgiving that every one in the world must hear that crack, and hurried on.

She hastened into the field in which the tents stood, and the next moment she had half paused, gasping. She had been certain something moved in the shadow of that tree.

Then she took command of herself sternly. "There's nothing there, you coward!" And certainly the shadow was quite still now. She forced herself on.

But when she was within ten yards of that tall, spreading tree she stopped dead, and this time a cold and terrible thrill of fear, permeating every nerve of her being, told her that the first suspicion had been true. There *was* something there—it was coming out——

Biddy was powerless to move. The visitant from the shadows came nearer, and now Biddy saw plainly that it was no strange or phantom apparition, but a tall, grim-faced girl clad in the same manner as herself, and immediately the figure spoke she recognized the voice of Gwen Grettell.

"I've been watching you come across the fields," said the stern, low tones. "I heard a noise like something falling, and I crept out to see if anyone was about. I saw you right over there in the moonlight, and I came out to wait for you."

Biddy said nothing. Each breath meant a struggle.

"You're a Third or Fourth Form girl, I think," went on the prefect. "Come nearer, please, so that the light falls on your face."

But Biddy was absolutely incapable of movement, and Gwen was obliged to advance herself. She took the girl by the shoulder and turned her face to the light.

Then she stepped back with an exclamation of amazement, horror and utter scorn.

"*Biddy!* And you are the new prefect, and Deborah trusted you to go straight!"

CHAPTER IX

DISGRACE

BIDDY stood with drooping head, speechless, in the moonlight before the glowering prefect, and wished that she had never been born, or that the earth would open and swallow her where she stood.

"Deborah trusted you!" went on Gwendolen. "Haven't you the least scrap of a sense of honour?"

Still Biddy was silent, and Gwendolen knew from the stricken look on the moonlit face that the Fourth Form girl was incapable of reply.

"Well, it's no good standing here now," said the prefect. "We shall rouse every one. Can you get your blankets from your tent without waking the others? Is anyone else out?"

Biddy shook her head.

"Does anyone else know that you are out?"

"No, Gwendolen," returned Biddy, almost inaudibly.

"Well, get your blankets from the tent without waking the others and come to my tent. I shall be waiting outside. Be quick!"

"Yes, Gwendolen," said Biddy faintly. She took her halting steps towards the tent, as in some awful dream. Stepping past the sleeping Maxime, she gathered her blankets clumsily into her arms. Rona

moved and sighed, but neither of her tent mates woke.

Gwendolen was waiting for her outside her own tent, which she shared with Margaret, who was now sitting up in her blankets with an expression of dismay on her good-humoured face.

"You will sleep on my mattress for what's left of the night," said Gwen quietly.

"Yes, Gwendolen," whispered Biddy again. She took off her mackintosh and lay down on the mattress.

"Come on, Gwendolen, share my bed. You'll be simply tired out in the morning!" exclaimed Margaret anxiously. But Gwendolen set her lips firmly.

"No, I shall watch the rest of the night," she said, taking up a squatting position on the end of Margaret's mattress. "One never knows——"

She did not finish her sentence, but Biddy winced, her head buried in the blankets. She knew well what Gwen was thinking—that she, Biddy, could not be trusted even now, and that she might try to steal away; or there might really be other girls out to-night, in spite of what she had said.

"Oh, very well!" Margaret gave in and went off to sleep.

As for Biddy, the remaining hours of that night were the most miserable she had ever known. The thoughts in her mind whirled and whirled, and her bones ached, but she had to deny herself even the luxury of tossing, for each time she moved the Sixth Form girl turned her gaze upon her, and the one thing in the world Biddy wanted was to be

left unnoticed. She immediately feigned sleep and burrowed down again into her blankets, wishing she could be buried in them for ever, and never, never face the world again.

But the world had to be faced. The dawn broke greyly, and Biddy lay still and silent, with closed but sleepless eyes. Gwendolen roused herself with a stifled yawn and threw a glance at the motionless bundle. She consulted her watch impatiently from time to time, and at last leaned over Margaret and shook her by the shoulder.

"Sorry to wake you, old girl, but I want to go along to Deborah and tell her before the morning bell goes. Er—stay awake, will you? She's asleep, but——" She ended with an expressive shrug, and Margaret answered in a whisper:

"Yes, all right; you go along."

The deadly cold of dawn was gone now, and the tent held a soft heat; but in the thick blankets an icy, uncontrollable chill had Biddy in its grasp.

"Why, what's the matter, child?" exclaimed the Sixth girl in quite kindly, pitying tones. "You needn't be so scared!"

"I'm c-c-cold!" stammered Biddy, though she knew quite well it was not physical cold which she was trying in vain to control.

"Cold? My dear child, you *are* cold!" ejaculated Margaret. "Here, have this blanket!" And in spite of Biddy's faint protests, she insisted on wrapping one of her own store round the shivering girl. Biddy was sitting up when Gwendolen re-entered the tent, and turned her head away so that she might not see what news was written

on the prefect's face. "Well?" inquired Margaret.

Gwendolen pursed her lips. "Deborah—well, I've never seen Deborah so upset and disgusted and angry!" she replied. And then, turning to the Fourth Form girl, added coldly: "You are to stay here until all the girls have gone up to school, Biddy. Then you can go and dress, and we shall see what can be done with you."

Biddy pulled the clothes over her head and plunged into a bitter sea of despair.

Clang! Clang! Clang! The getting-up bell was ringing.

"I'd better go and fix those youngsters in the other tent," exclaimed Gwendolen abruptly, about to shed her mackintosh. "They'll be giving an alarm if they find an empty bed." She disappeared again, to return in a few seconds.

"I just told them they were to go in the usual way," she informed Margaret, "and not talk about Biddy being away. I told them that she was in disgrace."

All around the camp now rose the hum of voices, as Conellan roused itself from slumber. The so-familiar sound seemed only to accentuate Biddy's sense of estrangement and misery, as she lay there still in her night-clothes, isolated from her fellows' activities.

The second bell clanged and a general exodus began from the surrounding tents. Margaret disappeared, but it was not until the last girl had gone that Gwen turned to the hot, wretched prisoner in the corner.

"You can go to your tent now and dress,"

she conceded. "Don't be long. Come back here afterwards. I shall be waiting for you."

Biddy pushed the clothes aside and stumbled to her feet. She hurried along to Tent Nine and dressed clumsily, finally slipping on the mackintosh which was always worn up to the school in case of rain on the return. Her fingers encountered in the pocket a soft, small substance, and for a moment she forgot her own troubles. That badge must be returned somehow this morning, or her efforts would have been in vain.

Gwen was waiting for her impatiently. "Come on, child. There will only just be time for breakfast. You will go in to prayers with the Sixth and afterwards report in the prefects' room."

Only a few moments were left before the breakfast bell would sound. Biddy hurried into the deserted cloak-room to leave her mac. She was relieved to find no one there. Thrusting her hand into the pocket of Hilda's mackintosh, she pushed and poked desperately. Ah, at last she had succeeded in making a hole!

She now drew from her own pocket the badge she had risked and lost so much to gain—Hilda's colours of the Second Eleven. It was an easy matter to squeeze them through the hole and work them down in the space between the rubber lining and the gabardine until they were stopped by the bottom hem.

Now, if she could only induce Hilda to look there, without raising her suspicions, all would be well. But how was she to get any word through to Hilda?

Biddy frowned anxiously, and it was with a sigh of relief that she saw the cloak-room door open

quietly and a face peer round the door. The visitor was Maxime, whose eyes looked red and stricken, and when her gaze fell on Biddy she came in quickly and closed the door.

"Oh, Biddy!" she breathed in a low, cautious, but agonized voice, blinking her damp eyes. "What's the matter, darlingest? It's been simply awful, wondering what has happened! Whatever can it be?"

Biddy avoided her gaze and spoke swiftly. "There's no time to talk. I don't think they're going to let me be with the Fourth this morning, and I must tell you something first. Listen, Maxime! Get Hilda to look for her colours again. I've found them right down in the hem of her mac. They'd been pushed through a hole in her pocket. Just get her to look there—don't say I suggested it—and be sure you do it in good time, before anyone knows she's lost them."

Maxime drew back, eyeing her friend narrowly and suspiciously. "I know they weren't there before, because I had that idea myself and felt all round the hem. You've just put them there. Where did you find them?"

"Oh, don't bother me with questions!" exclaimed Biddy desperately. But she felt that Maxime was determined to have the truth, and that in her, Biddy's, state it would be easily dragged out of her. And if Maxime suspected and did not quite know, she would talk and talk in her championship of the disgraced one, and somehow the real facts of the case would be known. It was better to make a clean breast of it.

"Maxime," she began in a husky, impressive voice, "will you promise solemnly, most *absolutely* solemnly, not to tell anyone but those I say, if I tell you where I found the badge?"

"All right," said Maxime, pale with suspense. She felt that there was some connexion between the finding of the colours and Biddy's disgrace. But she was not prepared for the shock of Biddy's answer.

"I found them on the bank opposite the island, where Hilda dropped them on the night of the feast."

"Biddy!" Maxime started back, horror in her eyes. "Then—oh, Biddy!—you were caught!"

Biddy nodded. "I wasn't caught there; no one knows anything about the island. I was caught just as I got back—by Gwen Grettell."

Maxime stood silent, struggling to digest this terrible news. Then the colour swept her cheeks.

"You're not going to be alone in this! We're all jolly well going to own up!"

Biddy stepped forward quickly and seized her wrist. "That's what I was afraid you'd say. Maxime, you mustn't! You've promised solemnly you won't!" Then she added desperately: "Oh, dear! There's the breakfast bell, and there's no time to—— Maxime, remember your promise. Don't say anything to anyone until we've talked about it, especially not to Hilda! Quick! Promise! Promise!"

"All right, I promise," conceded Maxime reluctantly. "But no amount of talking will make—— Oh, we must simply fly!"

Biddy had breakfast at the table of the Sixth,

squeezed in between two icily-mannered and disapproving prefects, feeling the curious eyes of the whole school upon her. She had not to face the Head Mistress, who was in bed with a chill that morning. She dared not look towards the table of the Fourth, from whence were directed many agonized, indignant and perplexed glances of sympathy.

When breakfast was over Biddy rose with the Sixth and, responding to a commanding gesture from Gwendolen, took her mouse-like place at the prefect's side while the great ones filed out of the dining-hall. She found herself being shepherded towards the prefects' room, and in a few moments the scene of a few days ago was being reset in its entirety. Once more the prefects sat round the table, once more Biddy faced the gaze of Deborah West, Conellan's head girl. But there all resemblance ended, for there was something in the face of Deborah and the rest of the prefects which had not been there before. Deborah's expression held the hardness of bitter disappointment and disgust as she eyed the pale, shrinking Fourth Form girl. And her opening words were very different from those of the last interview.

"And you are the girl I trusted!"

Biddy felt herself wince as she fixed her eyes desperately upon the ground.

"I should never have thought any girl capable of betraying a trust as you have done!" went on Deborah. "With the whole control of the Lower Fourth in your hands, head prefect, responsible for the good conduct of the other girls, with more

freedom than any Lower Fourth ever had before, just because we trusted to your honour—with all this freedom, you simply use it to take advantage of—to slip out when Angela had given up guarding the tent and wander at your own sweet will. It—well, it seems simply incredible to me ! "

Biddy gulped and blinked frantically. This was awful—even worse than she had expected. Then came the question she was dreading.

" Where had you been ? "

" For—for a walk," Biddy was heard faintly to answer.

" In what direction ? "

" To-towards the river, please, Deborah."

" Um ! Had you ever been out at night before ? "

" Y-y-yes, Deborah ! " The wretched girl was conscious of a stir of amazed indignation amongst the prefects.

" I see. It's a charming little habit of yours. Have you been out before, since you were made prefect ? "

" No, please, Deborah." Biddy's voice was very low.

" Well, of course, you haven't had much time." Deborah's tone withered. " And so you just went down last night to the river for a stroll. There was no one with you ? You met no one ? "

Biddy was profoundly thankful for the form taken by this question. She was able to reply truthfully (as regards that night) : " I was quite alone."

" H'm ! Well, of course, this means that ' self-government ' is entirely taken away from the Lower

Fourth, to begin with. It's rough on the others, but if their leaders will do such a thing—well, we are inclined to distrust the whole lot of you. And now for yourself. Of course, you realize that in the ordinary way you would simply be expelled ?" Biddy bent her head, blinking.

"However, the circumstances are exceptional —the new arrangements for sleeping and, of course, the new discipline. If I did not feel that this must be in some way my fault—because I was responsible for keeping all the girls safe at night—I should report you to Miss Demsford and you would be expelled. As it is, I am just going to impose some penalties upon you, take away your prefectship, and for the rest see that a strict rein is kept upon you by the prefects as a girl who is not to be trusted. We shall tell the other two that there will be no more Lower Fourth prefects.

"You will be out of the tournament, for one thing. I heard the day before yesterday that the Lower Fourth was petitioning to be allowed to hand in a list of entries, and I shall allow them all but yours. I will tell you to-morrow what other privileges will be taken away from you and what other penalties will be imposed."

At last Biddy was released, and went stumbling along the corridor towards the class-room. Miss Scallon looked up with a frown when she entered, and Biddy, as instructed, said mechanically : "Deborah is sorry, please, that she kept me late, and hopes you will excuse me."

"Oh, Deborah !" rejoined the form mistress, her brow clearing. "Oh, yes, certainly." She looked

keenly at Biddy, as the white-faced girl, under the fire of sympathetic glances from the rest of the form, went towards her seat.

When form was dismissed, Biddy found Rona, Grace and Hazel beside her.

"Biddy," said Rona, "we're jolly well going to talk this out. We've simply *made* Maxime tell us, so don't blame her. Let's go under the beech tree before the cricket match this afternoon."

"All right," replied Biddy shortly. "Hush! Here's Hilda." The others drifted off as the smaller girl, excited and flushed, hurried up.

"Oh, Biddy, I don't understand; but I'm sure you haven't done anything awful! Oh, I do wish I could help!" Her bright eyes were filled with tears, and Biddy turned away her head and spoke gruffly, with an attempt at carelessness.

"Oh, I was always a terrible being, you know, and I've got my deserts. Look here, what are you going to do about those colours? Have you told Margaret you've lost them?"

Hilda's face brightened involuntarily as she replied eagerly, "Oh, Biddy, I've found them! Isn't it splendid? It was Maxime who made me, really. She suggested that they might have worked down into the lining of the mac, and there I found them! I must have put them in my mac, meaning to take them to the tent, and then forgotten all about it. I didn't even know I had a hole in my pocket!"

"Oh, you're certainly a real genius, Hilda!" laughed Biddy, with a lightened heart. "Well, I'm jolly glad you've found them, kid."

Whatever she had suffered, at least it had not been in vain.

The meeting on the cricket field was hurried, as Biddy had been detailed for penance duties and would not be able even to see Hilda wear her rescued colours in the First Eleven match.

The Night Owls were looking very much disturbed and entirely determined. "Look here," Rona started off, "it's all rubbish, Biddy, about our keeping silent. We just shouldn't *dream* of it. If you're going to get into an awful row, we're going to be in too. Is it likely we're going to have all the fun and then leave you to face the music alone?"

Biddy had expected this, and now she drew a deep breath, knowing that a fight was ahead. "I knew you'd say that, girls," she said, "but listen, please. It isn't a question of me myself. It wouldn't make it any better for me if all the rest of you were in the row as well, but I know it won't stop you telling, for me just to say that. It's awfully decent of you. Really the whole idea was mine, so it's only right that I should get the thick end of the stick. But apart from ourselves, it's a question of Hilda." She told them briefly what Hilda had confided to her about the longed-for scholarship.

"I don't know why I kept on pressing the kid to come after that," she said. "It was pretty rotten of me, and I really knew it at the time. I just simply dragged her in; she didn't want to come—hated the idea of coming. Well, then, by ill luck she lost her badge there on that very

night. I suppose Max has told you that I went to find it. Well, I went because it seemed too absolutely awful to think that that kid's chances should be ruined just because she gave way to me one night. As it happened, I got caught. But the point is that if we are going to give the whole show away, as we shall if all you girls own up, I might as well never have gone at .ll. For we know jolly well that if it comes out Hilda will own up like a shot with the rest, and that will mean a finish of everything for her. Of course, she hasn't the faintest notion that I went to look for her colours, or she would own up now.

"Well, you know, girls, we simply can't get over the fact that we're responsible for her—particularly me. It won't make it any better for me if you all get into hot water, and it will jolly well ruin Hilda's chances for ever. It does seem awful for that to happen just because she gave way that single night."

There was silence when Biddy ended, and the Night Owls turned upon her flushed and perplexed faces; then they gathered their forces. They put up a good fight, but Biddy was immovable; and, besides, they saw only too well the justice of her stand.

The meeting of rebellion ended in a solemn promise on the part of the Night Owls not to breathe a word about the cave and their share in the expeditions unless Biddy spoke first.

Biddy was tired out and weary, but she had won.

CHAPTER X

ON GUARD FOR CONELLAN

OUTSIDE news had an odd way of penetrating into Conellan school-life and "being all over the place" in a day. Whether the maids divulged it to coaxing juniors, or whether mistresses incautiously exchanged it in the hearing of "pitchers" of various sizes, could never be definitely established. The fact remained that local news was generally known by the girls themselves, and the rumour of the burglary at Apland Court was very soon being passed excitedly along from form to form.

The Night Owlers, who had promised to support Hilda in the fancy-dress obstacle race, were spending a rainy afternoon evolving some wonderful effects. Biddy, though barred from taking part in the tournament, was snatching a few minutes between two of her penances to help the others.

"A burglar! Oh, how perfectly gorgeous!" breathed Maxime. "It does seem such ages since anything exciting happened—anything nicely exciting, I mean," she corrected hastily.

"It's all very well to say it's gorgeous!" reproved Rona Moore solemnly, in a shocked voice. "Have you no thought at all, girl, for the poor people who have been robbed, scared, brutally treated, frightened into bits, horrified——"

"Oh, do be quiet, Rona!" begged Grace, covering up her ears. "You know jolly well no one was brutally treated or frightened into any bits at all. Of course, we're sorry they've had things stolen, but they're not poor people at all. Nobody even saw the robber; and I must say I feel just like Maxime—jolly glad for a little excitement!"

"Nobody saw the robber?" exclaimed Biddy. "Why, Kitty Penny was describing him down to the last shoelace only a minute ago!"

Rona replied: "Oh, that man! It's some one who's been seen about, and they're pretty sure it's the burglar. But no one knows, really."

"Every one seems to think it's so odd of him to disappear just now," put in Hazel, "instead of waiting for the police to walk up and take him to a dungeon!"

"No; they just think it's rather smart of him," replied Rona. "After all, it isn't frightfully easy to disappear in a place like this, when there are not many houses about outside the village. This man was seen not far away the day before, and then the whole thing happened in the night. A window was broken open, and in the morning the wonderful Apland gold plate had disappeared. And the man had disappeared, too, off the face of the earth."

"I expect he's gone east to one of the big towns," observed Maxime wisely.

"Well, anyway, he hasn't been seen round here since," said Rona. "And I'm not one of your awful sensationalists myself. I hope he gives us a clear berth. Miss Demsford and Miss Aster are jolly proud of their carved ivory and all that valu-

able Eastern stuff and those silver things. It would upset them horribly if they disappeared too."

"Well, he isn't likely to hang round here and do another burglary so soon," commented Biddy. "So we needn't worry our valuable brains about it."

Biddy was looking worn and strained. The air of exuberant spirits and health with which she had greeted the beginning of term had sobered down, and laugh and gibe were not so ready as they had been a few short weeks ago.

The Lower Fourth had been "splendid" over the loss of home rule and degradation to the senior-prefect-governed class. It was bad enough to know herself that it was all her fault that it had happened, but Biddy felt it would have been almost impossible to bear if the Lower Fourth had rubbed in that fact, had complained and reminded, as some forms might have done, instead of standing by her loyally to a man. Not one of the girls believed that their leader had "let them down" and never intended to keep the rules they had all agreed to respect. They were not wholly in the secret, but every one knew there was "something queer" about it, that it wasn't so much Biddy's fault as it seemed. The Fourth, who, though often light-headed and careless, were really given to generous enthusiasms, had vowed, in a glow of loyalty, "not to make it any more rotten for Biddy" than they could help.

The impositions of various duties and the deprivation of various privileges marked Biddy out from the rest every day, and would do so, probably, until the end of the term; they were quite enough for

Biddy to worry over, declared the girls. They would have been surprised had they known that Biddy almost welcomed them. They gave some relief from the feeling of self-reproach and self-blame which oppressed Biddy for the way in which she had "muddled up the term" for the Fourth generally, and had upset the whole happy scheme of self-government. But what she chiefly wanted to drive from her mind was the remembrance of the words of Deborah West and the look of contempt upon her face.

The excitement over the news of the burglary was destined to be enormously increased in the course of a few days. Before that, girls who, like Maxime, were panting for excitement, had tried to talk themselves into believing that there was danger to Conellan School itself. They had not really believed it, and the burglar had remained a far-away creature quite unconnected with ordinary life. Now, however, something happened which was to give him life and reality to the world of Conellan.

It was rumoured that the burglar had been seen in the last few days, and, what was more, that he had been seen within a mile of the school! The exciting report ran from form to form, till it was impossible for authority to ignore the fact that, as usual, the girls had gathered the news.

"I suppose some one must have heard what was said on the 'phone!" exclaimed Miss Demsford to the elder mistress. "I cannot account for it else, seeing that I had the news myself from the police only this afternoon. I wish they could afford

to send a man over to stay here ; but, of course, that is impossible "

" Oh, we shall be all right," returned Miss Aster comfortingly. " After all, the man was seen about here days ago, apparently, and they have not troubled to let us know before ; and they would have done so if they had thought there was any danger. Probably it is not the burglar at all. You know what these country police are ! Anyway, we have the gardener on the premises, and his son too, and you say he does not believe there is any danger ? "

" He pooh-poohs the whole idea," said Miss Demsford, looking slightly comforted. " I'm afraid Crockett hasn't much admiration for the village police. He thinks the man has made off long ago. However, he is going to get another tent, so that he and George may sleep outside, not very far from the girls' encampment. Even if the danger is only fancied, now that the girls have heard of it I could not allow them to sleep outside without some sort of safeguard. We have no spare tent at present, so Crockett will not be able to start until to-morrow. Meanwhile, I think I had better explain the matter to the girls, as they have got hold of so much of it, and say that there is no cause for alarm and that they will be guarded from to-morrow night onwards until the man is captured."

This announcement was duly made after prep and created a buzz of sensation. Conellan was " thrilled," to quote the Lower School. An element of danger was in the air, and yet so remote as hardly

to cause the most nervous a qualm, on turning out to sleep on this glorious summer evening!

But Biddy looked startled and distinctly worried, so Maxime thought, as the three girls repaired to their tent as usual.

"I expect Biddy's worrying about the burglar!" laughed Rona, as she proceeded to brush her locks vigorously. "Biddy's such a nervous little thing; she'll want to hold our hands to-night!"

Biddy gave vent to a short, odd little laugh. "As a matter of fact, that's just what I *am* worrying about!"

"Biddy!" The two girls faced her in astonishment. "It's the last thing on earth I should have thought would really worry you!" exclaimed Maxime. "You don't really mean you think he'll come and——"

"Look here," broke in Biddy. "There's a part of the happening that night when—when I went to the cave that I never told you. I've rather hated talking about the whole thing, and didn't bother any more about that, as we were never going again. And it didn't seem to occur to me at all when we were talking about the burglar the other day. I don't know why. It wasn't till the Head told us to-night that he had been seen near that I suddenly had a horrible thought! It just floored me, and I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before; and —well, *I* don't know what to do!"

"What is it, Biddy?" cried Rona. "You'll make us just frantic!"

"What I didn't tell you was this," said Biddy soberly. "*Some one had been in the cave.* Our

things had been eaten ; and, girls, it looked very much, too, as though some one had been sleeping there. It never occurred to me till to-day who it might possibly be, and then I seemed to know all in a flash. The——"

"The burglar!" The exclamation broke simultaneously from the startled girls as they gazed at Biddy in horror.

Biddy nodded. "It seems jolly well like it, doesn't it? He disappeared mysteriously, and now he's been seen hanging round here ; where else is there he could hide so safely as in the hidden cave?"

"He must have been there all the time, then!" exclaimed Maxime in an awe-stricken voice. "He must have found it directly after we left. And, oh, he's been living there and burgling at the same time!"

"It's a queer thing," said Rona. "I was going to tell you to-night what Hazel heard to-day. Olive Gunnell was keeping her waiting while she wrote a note to Deborah, and she said to Margaret : 'They've been searching the island up the river, and I should have thought it would have been a jolly place to hide in ; but they can't find any trace of him there.' Hazel was so excited she nearly blurted out a question, and just stopped in time. But she felt startled and relieved all at once. But if they've really searched the island, Biddy, I can't understand——"

"You forget how well the cave's hidden," returned Biddy. "We only found it by accident ; and I suppose the burglar must have found it the same way, when he was hiding in the quarry."

The other two digested this supposition in silence. Then Maxime broke out: "Then, Biddy, he—the burglar—he may be still there!"

Biddy nodded grimly. "Now you've reached the point," she said.

Yes, they had indeed reached the point. They realized now why Biddy was looking worried and grim. If the burglar was really there—and there seemed every reason to suppose so—then the affair of the cave had ceased to be a private, secret escapade of their own. It had become a matter of public importance. Their cave, their own particular cave, was being used as a base for robbery, as a hiding-place for the robber. They had a horrid and scaring sensation of being plunged into ice-cold water. The whole thing had suddenly grown too big, too responsible, for three immature school girls.

Rona was decidedly pale. She laid down her brush and stared in horror at the leader of the Fourth. "Then, Biddy, we——"

"What *are* you girls doing?" A voice at the tent door made them start and turn guiltily. Angela Paine surveyed them indignantly. "Really! To think that I should even have to come and see if you are nearly ready for bed! You might be absolute infants!"

There was no chance again that night of exchanging one single private word, and the three went to bed with the great issue undiscussed. Rona and Maxime, as usual, were quickly asleep, but Biddy, with her brain in a whirl of worry and perplexity, lay staring into the darkness long after

the whole camp was in silence, facing the terrible problem.

That cave *must* be discovered, for it hid a criminal and gave him further chance of breaking the law with safety. That cave must *not* be discovered, for it held the secret of the Night Owls, and its discovery meant absolute and irrevocable disgrace for all of the company. It was no wonder that Biddy's head was hot and throbbing as she tossed and turned, trying to decide what must be done, and then, when the only obvious course could no longer be blinked, trying not to face the pictures of her own, but particularly her chums', disgrace and unhappiness, which rose before her in the silent darkness.

The grey of dawn was just beginning to streak the blackness, when a faint sound suddenly broke on Biddy's ears like an alarm, and she sat bolt upright, abruptly on the alert. The sound was so faint that it would not have roused a sleeper, but there was something stealthy and odd about it which held her attention, and she listened with every sense alert. Then she leaned sideways, pulled up the tent peg as she had often done before and peered out. It was possible to make out objects clearly in the greyness. The sound came again.

Yes, there was some one out there, moving. Even as she watched, a dark, creeping figure stole past the end of the lines of tents and emerged at the back into view. It was the figure of a strange man, certainly not that of the gardener or his son, and it bore a bundle upon its back. As he crept along the man glanced stealthily from side to side,

and Biddy, in a sudden panic, almost let the tent skirting fall. What was he doing there? There was no right of way across the fields behind the encampment. And what would anyone be doing there at this time of the night on any rightful errand? The truth came to her in a flash.

It was the burglar!

Time seemed to race, though only a few seconds passed as Biddy watched the stooping figure creep over the grass towards the first field. She was trying to think quickly. She dropped the canvas and turned back into the tent. The man must be followed—at once—and before any alarm was raised. If he knew anyone was on his track he would simply disappear again. And to what earth this time? She glanced swiftly at Angela. The prefect lay on her back, snoring rather deeply, the soundest sleeper in the whole of Conellan. It would be the work of moments to awaken her. Even when she was roused she would be exclamatory and indignant before she understood, and the man might hear the sound and, anyway, would be far off by that time.

Biddy gripped her hands together. There was no time to waste in this desperate emergency. Rona and Maxime were the lightest of sleepers, the wariest of wakers. She slipped from her blankets and roused them as she had done on nights of old, with a shoulder pressure and a quick caution breathed into their ears. And in a second they were both awake.

"Don't talk!" breathed Biddy. She motioned rapidly to the other two girls, and still blinking

with sleep and amazement, they obeyed her gestures and crept after Biddy under the raised canvas.

They were out in the grey dawn now, and Biddy, with a sign for silence, hurried them across the grass and into the shadow of the farther hedge before she halted and breathed to her bewildered companions the explanation of this strange night awakening.

"The burglar!" she gasped. "He's come from the school with a bag—all full—no time to rouse anyone. We must follow him and find where he goes!"

The two staring faces in the dim dawn seemed to turn suddenly pale and scared; but swiftly the two Night Owls had gathered themselves together and responded. "All right, Biddy!" They crept over the stile and over the next field without seeing anyone ahead, and Biddy, with a throb of fear, began to think that he had again vanished, or had guessed at pursuit and was waiting to waylay them.

But suddenly Maxime seized her arm. "There he is!" she hissed. "Right down on the way to the river! We can get through that broken hedge and catch him up!"

A thought struck home to them all at the same time. They were absolutely unarmed, and their strength would be of little avail against that of a desperate man. If he discovered that they were on his track——

"Come on, girls!" whispered Biddy through her teeth. They hurried stealthily forward.

CHAPTER XI

CATASTROPHE !

THE three girls crept on through the shadows, and ahead of them hurried steadily the dark mysterious form bearing the sack. Their hearts were beating wildly, and when once the man halted suddenly, they dropped with frantic haste behind a hedge, just as he set down the sack and peered around.

" He's heard something ! " breathed Rona, in the lowest of whispers. To Maxime the beating of her heart seemed quite loud enough for the man to hear in the dusk across two fields. However, dodging above the brambles they saw him throw the sack once more over his shoulder and tramp on, apparently contented that the alarm had been unfounded.

" We'll crawl through the hole in the next hedge," whispered Biddy, " and creep along by the side of the field." They obeyed the directions and had crossed one field, and, after a cautious look around, were about to venture into the next, when Rona clutched both girls by the arm and held them, with a stifled gasp. In obedience to her signs, they drew back, and crawling on the ground peered through a hole in the thick hedge. The man was squatting on the ground just within a few yards of them.

Another moment and they would have been over the stile and right into his sight !

It had been such a close escape that the girls quite trembled as they lay there. But their fears were soon swallowed up in the excitement of what took place the next moment, for the man tipped up the mysterious sack, and on to the grass in the faint grey light of the dawn came scattering the Conellan treasures !

It was impossible to distinguish them clearly, but they caught the shine of silver and the dull gleam of what might have been ivory or pearl. The girls almost gave the alarm again by leaning forward eagerly to view them.

As for the burglar, the inspection of his haul seemed to please him, for with a dull grunt of satisfaction he began to pile the treasures back into his sack. Then he rose, heaved up his burden and set out once more.

" Wait till he gets a field or two away before we start again," breathed Biddy.

But the burglar had hardly got half-way across the field when he seemed again to grow suspicious. He stopped once more and listened. The girls had moved with tremendous caution and their feet were bare, but some small sound they had made had apparently wafted to his ear. He stood there so long, glancing from left to right and backwards towards where they lay, that Maxime felt she *must* scream. But just as they felt they could bear the strain no longer, he took to his heels and began to run as fast as he could across the field.

The girls gripped each other in dismay. He had

taken the alarm this time ! What were they to do ? They would soon give the pursuit away if they tried to run, and besides, he might be waiting unseen for his pursuers round some corner. . . .

As his hurried footsteps took their way across the next field, Biddy whispered low to her companions.

" It's no good our going any farther. We can do nothing now. We must get help. You two stay and see if anything happens. I'm sorry to leave you alone, but I don't think he'll come back, and I'm heaps the fastest runner ! "

" Yes, you go ! " breathed Rona ; " and run like mad ! "

Biddy did " run like mad." She was panting by the time she reached the silent encampment and hastened along to the tent where the head girl slept. Light-footed she sped past the tents just visible in the greyness, and the next moment was safely in Deborah's tent, bending over the head girl, shaking her urgently by the shoulder.

The head girl was no Angela ; she was wide awake and alert on the instant.

" Well, what is it ? " she asked quickly, in a low tone, peering at the other girl through the gloom narrowly. " Some one ill ? Who are you ? "

But at Biddy's whisper she started up in amazement.

" Deborah ! It's a burglar ! " panted Biddy.

" *The burglar !* "

" He's down in the fields by the river ! " breathed Biddy. " He's got Miss Demsford's silver and things, and he's escaping as hard as he can ! "

Deborah sprang from her mattress and slipped on her mackintosh, thinking rapidly and trying to keep cool. "We must find the gardener," she muttered.

"He'll get away! He's running!" cried Biddy under her breath, and the head girl knit her brows and reached for a hockey-stick. There were two old sticks there which she had been looking over for repairs, for the next season. "Go back to your tent now, child," she ordered. "I'll attend to this."

"Oh, please, Deborah, Rona Moore and Maxime are there keeping watch!" cried Biddy, in an agony of suspense. "You won't know where they are; mayn't I come and show you?"

"Rona and Maxime!" repeated the head girl utterly perplexed. However, there was no time to discuss things. "Very well," she said. She thought of Gwen Grettell at once, as the most physically strong of all her prefects, and one easy to rouse, and, bidding Biddy follow, hastened silently to Gwen's tent. A moment later, Gwen also, with jaw set pugnaciously, was clothed in her mackintosh and gripping the hockey-stick which Deborah handed her.

"You, Margaret," ordered the head girl, "dash up to the house, wake Crockett and George, and tell them to follow us!"

"Tell them to go to the island down the river!" panted Biddy. "In the little old quarry!"

The head girl looked at her again, with knit brows, but said nothing, hastening out of the tent with Gwen and Biddy behind her.

A few minutes later, two relieved girls, very white and nervy in the slowly trickling greyness of dawn, were greeting the reinforcements.

"He's gone; we heard him running till we couldn't hear footsteps any more!"

"Which way has he gone?" said Deborah quickly. "Now there are so many of us we should not be afraid to tackle him!"

"Better send the kids back," put in Gwen, but Deborah shook her head anxiously. "We don't know who else is about. I'd rather they were with us than wandering about alone. Come on!" Then she paused. "What's this about the island?"

Biddy grew crimson even at that moment. "We thought—that is—we pretty well know that he's been hiding in a cave on the island—and we think he's gone there to-night!"

Deborah's face expressed absolute amazement. "You pretty well know! A cave on the island!" Even in the dusk the girls could sense the growing grimness in her voice, but she did not waste time now on demands for explanations. "Well, then, we've got to see if he does go there, and that he doesn't get away before help arrives."

The procession of five, headed by the two Sixth Form girls, gripping their hockey-sticks, set off at a half-run. Deborah and Gwen wore macs and shoes, but only the excitement of the moment kept the Fourth girls from noticing the thistles and stones their bare feet encountered. On they hurried, and now they grew silent and began to creep under cover as the river drew in sight. The field they were crossing was higher than the rest, and just as

they glimpsed the grey island, a faint splash broke the silence of the dawn.

A pale streak marked the water, forging on towards the island, and with a quick thrill of the heart the pursuers knew that they had glimpsed their quarry. He had just dived into the water, and even as they watched, the cracking of bushes told them that he was scrambling out on the bank of the island.

"We'll give him time to get down into the quarry," said Deborah in a tense voice, "and then we'll go over."

"Hadn't we better wait over here till help comes?" suggested Gwen.

"Then he may get off the other side of the island," replied the head girl in a rather unsteady voice. "We'll just creep as far as the quarry and keep watch." She was wishing hard that she had left the juniors behind.

It was evident that the man had left the boat alone to avoid suspicion that he was hiding upon the island, for it was still securely moored to the bank. The burglar, thinking he was far away from danger, seemed to have thrown aside caution, for he made no attempt to move silently, and they could plainly hear his progress through the wood. It was not until the sounds had died away and they judged that he had descended into the cave, that they dared to cross, using the paddle stealthily in the rising dawn. They trod lightly through the wood, and then Maxime slipped on a broken bough and came to the ground. She made very little noise, but the exploring party, motionless, with bated breath, thought it detected a rustling sound on the other side

of the quarry. However, they crept on stealthily, and then lying down in the top of the quarry listened with all their might.

The moments went by and yet no sound came up from the quarry. In their " frozen " attitude, nerve and muscle ached, till it seemed that they could not keep up the strain. And still no faintest rustle broke the silence down below, and slowly but surely a sickening conviction stole over the watching five. They were guarding an empty stall. There was no one in the cave.

As this fact dawned on their consciousness, Biddy suddenly let herself down over the edge of the quarry and began to make for the cave. Maxime was about to follow, but Deborah held her back. If any spying was to be successful it must be done by one only. She held herself in readiness to spring over the edge and dash to the rescue should any cry come from Biddy.

But in another second Biddy was up again, her excited face plain now in the light of dawn. " He's gone ! " she whispered. " There's no one there ! "

A horrid sense of disappointment possessed the others as they clambered down to the cave. All their labour had been in vain. The burglar had taken the alarm and escaped—was probably, by this time, swimming away from the other side of the island. But they would search the quarry first, though the now clear light showed plainly that he was not there.

It was obvious, too, that the cave was empty, though Biddy poked her head inside to peer around. The next moment a startled cry rang from her lips.

The others halted in their tracks. The two elder girls gripped their hockey-sticks.

"Look—look!" But there was no danger there, only a thrilling gleam and shimmer which made them gasp, drop their sticks and dash forward. The sack which the burglar had carried lay on its side on the floor of the cave and from it was spilling something shining and clear—the Conellan silver!

"Oh!" The united exclamation broke wildly from their lips, and they forgot the need for caution. The burglar *had* taken the alarm, then—and in his fright he had left his haul of treasure behind him.

"Oh! Good! What luck!" gasped Deborah, bending over the sack. She and Biddy were inside the cave; the others, leaning forward, stood peering in the dawnlight, their eyes wide.

"I should think——" began Gwen Grettell; and then suddenly a strange rumbling sound was heard. The words were caught from her very lips and drowned as it swelled ominously. Lips parted, eyes wide, they stood transfixed. Then before the startled girls could move a finger, before even Maxime could release the scream quivering upon her lips, the world seemed to be falling around them in a confusion of earth and stones.

Crash—rumble—and crash again!

Biddy had only just time to throw herself instinctively over the kneeling Deborah, when the whole avalanche descended upon her, knocking her senseless into a whirl of darkness and pain. Half the side of the quarry had crashed down, bringing with it part of the cave roof, burying Biddy, Gwen, and Deborah in its fall.

To Maxime and Rona, rising half-stunned from the débris, came the greatest horror of the next moment. Where a few seconds ago had been the cave and the forms of their schoolfellows, was now to be seen nothing but a heap of earth and boulders, with the dust slowly settling in the dawn.

Now Maxime *did* scream, till Rona, with a trembling hand, seized her by the arm. " Don't, Max—stop, for Heaven's sake ! "

" Oh, they're in there ! It's too horrible ! " cried Max, struggling for control.

The sound of footsteps plunging frantically away into the wood told that Maxime's screams had carried fear in another direction. The burglar, creeping back, had discovered that his pursuers were only girls and had rolled down a big boulder to scare them away. Now the screams told him that he had done more—what, he dared not stay to see. The rock had started an avalanche of earth and boulders, and the noise and the screams put terror into the man's heart as he ran.

" Quick—quick ! " cried Rona. " We must get them out ! "

She darted forward and, seizing a huge stone on the edge of the rubble, began to tug it away with all her might. Maxime seized another. They pushed rocks away, threw themselves on their knees and burrowed frantically in the loose earth and rocks, like animals, working for dear life.

There was no sound at all from beneath that terrible heap which had swallowed up their schoolfellows.

Uncovering the two hockey-sticks, they snatched

them up to lever away the stones. Then Maxime gave a sudden cry. On the fringe of the heap at the side she had seen a dusty hand protruding, and she simply flung herself upon it, Rona following. Desperately they scraped and dug away the covering earth, then, with a sob of excitement, they came upon Gwen Grettell, dusty and earth-stained. Seizing her arms, they dragged her out of the heap and bent over her. She was alive—her eyelids were flickering.

"Gwen, Gwen, wake up!" Maxime shouted in her ear, as they chafed her hands desperately. They dare not take time to go for water, and a deep throb of relief went through them as Gwen stirred and opened her eyes. She was unhurt.

Half-way up, now, something began to slide and slither, and the girls just stepped back in time to avoid a big round piece of rock which their burrowing had disturbed, as it came rumbling down and subsided in the quarry. It had helped to clear their way, and they went at their task with wild redoubled vigour. Gwen was sitting up now, with her hand to her head, trying evidently to collect her senses and make out where she was.

Maxime began to sob as she worked, the tears streaming down her stained and dusty face. She had no idea that she was crying; her only thought was that they must, must, must reach darling, splendid Biddy and Deborah in time—they must, must, must! Rona's face, dusty and earthy too, was set and grim, streaked with perspiration. The minutes during which they worked so frantically seemed to them hours, and yet there was no sign of the buried girls.

Then Rona sprang forward, a cry of joy on her lips. "Biddy!" It was only the heel of a small, bare, dusty foot which showed in the rubble, but to the excited girls it brought relief unspeakable—and then a wave of dread. They worked like two possessed, and started when Gwen's voice spoke unexpectedly at their elbow. She was shaky, but she had recovered and realized everything.

"Steady, girls—don't bring the stuff down!" she said in a shaking voice. "I can help now. I'll clear that boulder out of the way and you can get at things better. Heavens—there's a tree down!"

"Yes, it's that beech tree off the bank!" gasped Rona. "It's fallen right across here."

Absorption in their task and their anxious emotions had made the girls oblivious to the fact, but for the last few minutes there had been shouts and commotion on the river-bank, and now the sound of running footsteps approached over the island. The girls, tugging and scraping, gave no heed.

The beech tree, they found, had fallen across Biddy, and the knowledge awoke hope and dread. The tree might have injured her—but, on the other hand, it might have taken some of the weight of the avalanche.

"Deborah's underneath!" gasped Maxime at length, in a squeaky voice which broke unexpectedly. And the next exclamation came from Gwen, sudden, explosive with gratitude. "Thank Heaven, the tree has saved them!"

For they had uncovered the two girls at last,

and now they were able to drag them out from under the shielding tree. Deborah lay underneath, her forehead resting on her outflung arm. Over her lay the still, small form of Biddy, face downwards, her arms outspread to shield, her very attitude speaking of protecting love.

As they pulled the unconscious girls from under the tree, they became suddenly conscious that some one was crashing down into the quarry, and an anxious voice panted at their side.

"What is it, miss? What in the world has happened?" It was George who stood there, wet and dripping from his swim across the stream.

Gwen was kneeling by Deborah's side, bending over her, and only glanced up to gasp out: "The side of the quarry came down! It seemed as though some one had rolled a rock down. Get some water quickly, will you?"

George, however, gave one glance at the pale face of Biddy and answered quickly: "I'd better attend to this one, miss, at once! If one of the little girls——"

"I'll go!" cried Rona, tossing her hair back from her weary, grime-streaked face, and seizing on an enamel cup which lay in the bottom of the quarry, she scrambled up and made for the river.

Deborah was unconscious, but seemed to have received no injury. Biddy, however, was in a very different case.

"Oh, look!" moaned Maxime. "Her poor head!" A thin stream of blood was trickling down Biddy's grey, earth-stained cheek, and at the back of her head the wavy brown hair was matted

and red. George had seen service in the Army and he examined her with rapid efficiency.

" Nasty knock on the head—and the lass's arm is broken, too," he announced, adding kindly : " but bless you, don't cry, miss, we'll soon have her as right as ninepence. Ah, here's the water, and now you'll see they'll come round all right ! "

He was right about Deborah, who was suffering from nothing worse than the shock of the fall and the want of air. In a few minutes she was sitting up against Gwen's arm making anxious inquiries about Biddy. " What happened ? It all seems like a nightmare ! I remember Biddy throwing herself on the top of me—oh, oh, poor little Biddy, what has happened to her ? "

She had just caught sight of blood-stained, prostrate Biddy.

Gwen told her quickly, adding : " George has been bathing her head, and—look, she's coming round ! "

Yes, Biddy was coming round. She blinked up into the anxious faces bending over her, and then, vaguely recognizing Maxime's, attempted a careless smile.

" Oh, Biddy darling, are you better ? " Maxime's breath was caught in a sob.

" Oh, yes, I'm all—all—I'm all ri——" murmured Biddy.

" Now, then, missie," said George, " don't go off again."

With the two rescued ones well on the way to recovery, there was time now to think of other things, and Rona broke in shakily : " I s'pose I'd better go and tell Margaret they're all right. She's

over on the other side, and she shouted something when I went for the water. I could only stay to shout back that every one was safe. I don't know what she said."

George looked up from the splint he was constructing for Biddy's arm. "Ah, then, you don't know that we've caught the chap as did all the mischief!"

"What?" Five startled faces turned towards him. "You've caught the burglar already!"

George nodded with grim satisfaction. "Ay, we've caught him safe enough. He must have swum across farther up, and he was just making off when we came along. We'd just heard those screams and we came for him like a couple of lions. He put up a fight, I can tell you, but we got the best of it. I tied him up with a bit of rope and father's guarding him now, till I get back."

Weary and worn as they were, the five girls thrilled with excitement at the news, and Maxime cried: "And we've got the things he stole from Conellan, George! They're somewhere under there." She pointed to the heap of debris.

"That's good!" said George. "He'll have something to answer for. We'll come back and dig them out. Now, when I've settled this young lady comfortably, father and I'll take him along to the village and bring help for you." And that was the way in which it was arranged.

Some time later, Farmer Hopple's milk-cart, with the girls made comfortable within and George trudging at the side, wound its way along the road to Conellan.

It was queer to find the school and camp still locked in slumber, unconscious of the desperate deeds which had been compassed that dawning.

"I must wake Miss Demsford and Miss Aster," said Deborah. "Margaret, while I see about getting Biddy into the sick bay I wish you'd get some hot baths ready for the others. Gwen, you look at the last gasp, and so do the kiddies. Rona and Maxime, when you have had your bath, go and lie down in your tent and try to sleep." Suddenly she looked at them queerly. "There's plenty of time yet before we think of things!"

CHAPTER XII

THE FATE OF THE NIGHT OWLS

BIDDY, on her journey up to the sick bay in the strong arms of Crockett, turned Deborah's words vaguely and distressedly over in her mind. "Yes, there's plenty of time yet," she told herself. "Plenty of time for——"

"Now, don't you go fainting again," said Crockett kindly. "For of all the plucky youngsters you take some beating. They tell me you've likely saved Miss Deborah's life."

"Oh, that's rubbish, Crockett!" muttered Biddy; but a low voice broke in as Deborah entered the room behind them.

"No, Biddy, it's true. That tree would have broken my arm instead of yours, and the stone which fell on you would have hurt me and perhaps killed me. But don't try to think about anything now. Lay her down here, please, Crockett. Now, Biddy dear, drink this water and lie still till Miss Aster comes to make you comfy."

"Yes, Deborah," muttered Biddy. She was sure now that she was in a dream. "Biddy dear, Biddy dear, Biddy dear——" the words swept over and over in her brain. Deborah, the head girl, in that low almost loving voice was calling her: "Biddy dear, Biddy dear, Biddy dear. . . ."

"She's off again, miss," said some one in the far away. Yes, Biddy was off again, far from Conellan, and there were relieved watchers in the sick bay when the doctor arrived at last to bring her safely back.

Deborah only waited to hear the doctor's favourable verdict before hurrying away to take the news to the other actors in the night's adventures.

The servants had been bustling about for some time when Deborah left the school and crossed towards the camp. As she put her head into Tent Nine, the owners of two small white faces, who had been awaiting her eagerly, sat up to ask anxiously: "Oh, Deborah, how is she?" Angela was still sleeping soundly.

"You ought to be asleep," said Deborah, coming in smiling, though weary.

"We couldn't sleep!" cried Maxime. "Oh, do tell us how Biddy is!"

Deborah sat down on the mattress as though all her strength had gone, but answered cheerily: "The doctor says she will do splendidly. The arm is a simple fracture, and the wound in her head is a shallow one and will soon heal up, he says. She'll soon be as well as ever."

"Oh *dear*!" Maxime suddenly broke down damply and wiped her eyes surreptitiously on the corner of her blanket. "It's so lovely to hear it. She looked so-s-s-s-so awful!"

Rona said nothing, but beamed. Both the girls were scratched and bruised.

The joyful news given, a sudden constraint descended on the trio, the shadow of menacing

mystery which had not yet been probed and was felt alike by the culprits and authority itself. This was no time, however, the head girl felt, for dealing with it, and she rose wearily, saying : " Well, go to sleep if you can. I'll tell Alice to have breakfast for you later."

The faces of the two smaller girls, however, had suddenly grown pale and apprehensive, but resolved.

" Deborah ! " said Maxime faintly, and the head girl turned. " Please, we want to tell you all about it. Of course, you'll be frightfully angry." Her voice shook. " But, of course, you are wondering how Biddy knew about the cave—and we want to say that *we* knew, too."

Deborah's face, too, was pale, as she eyed her steadily with drawn brows.

" You knew, Maxime ? How did you know ? "

" Please, Deborah, we used to go there ; we went several times. It—it was before we had prefects of our own. We went at night."

" You went at night ! " A real thrill of horror sounded in Deborah's voice. She had thought everything safe and happy at Conellan—and all the while this was going on ! " Oh ! and so that was where Biddy had been to that night she was caught ? "

Rona broke in vehemently. " Oh, yes—but——" She stopped herself abruptly. She had been on the verge of breaking her solemn promise.

" And that," said Deborah sadly, her brain whirling, " was after she was a prefect. Did *you* go after you were made self-governing ? "

" No, Deborah," returned the two girls in subdued

voices. In their championship of Biddy, they even wished then that they could say "yes," and range themselves at Biddy's side in the deeper disgrace.

"Please, we talked about it last night," muttered Maxime, "and Biddy thought we must tell, because we felt sure the burglar was there."

Deborah sighed from the depth of tiredness and disillusion and turned towards the doorway.

"Well, I'll leave you now," she said in a dull voice. Her feet dragged wearily as she took her way to her own tent. Never since the proud, awe-inspiring day when she had been made head girl, had anything so disheartening and horrifying happened at Conellan; and this during her first term of entire control!

There was silence in the tent for some minutes, then Maxime exploded piteously: "Oh, Rona, if only we could tell why Biddy went that night she was caught! If only we could say that she went to the cave to find Hilda's colours and save her from disgrace!"

Rona grunted with emotion, and then both girls looked up with a start. A shadow was darkening the doorway. Hilda stood there, her startled eyes wide, as though stricken motionless with horror. No words were needed! They knew that she had heard. She came in slowly. Her voice was high and unstrung.

"Biddy went there for me—for my colours! I'd dropped them there!" The scared girls were silent, and she went on: "Then Biddy's been in disgrace all for me! Where's Biddy? I saw Deborah come out—I felt somehow that something

was wrong—I *had* to come! And now—what has happened?—where *is* Biddy?"

Her voice was rising higher in her agitation and Rona sprang from her blankets and seized her by the arm. "Hush, Hilda, Angela will wake! It's all right! Biddy's all right!" Then she added: "I'm sorry you heard, Hilda—Biddy didn't want you to know."

Hilda dragged at her arm. "Let me go! I'm going straight away to tell Deborah. Oh, and then all of you——" She paused in dismay at the remembrance that the other girls were involved.

"Listen," said Rona soberly. "It's all come out." Quickly and softly she told what had happened during the night, and as her story ended, the first bell rang. "Go in now, Hilda—hurry," she said, "or you'll get into trouble for being here at all."

"I'm not going in! I'm going to see Deborah!" cried the girl. "You think I'm going to be the only one to keep quiet when it's all through me!" She broke away, her pale face working with emotion, and they heard her running on the soft grass till she stumbled breathless into the tent of Deborah.

Deborah, the wreck of her usual bright, firm, confident self, was sitting listlessly on a camp chair while Margaret bustled round collecting towels and clothes. "Come along, dear old girl, a bath will do you good," Margaret said, and then stopped in utter amazement. The small, agitated form of a Fourth Form girl flung itself, panting, into the head girl's sacred tent.

" Deborah ! Oh, Deborah, it wasn't Biddy at all ! It was me—all me ! "

Deborah was head girl again in a second. " Steady on ! " she ordered, as she sprang to her feet and supported the staggering child. " Now, then, what is it you want to say ? Don't be frightened ! "

The story was told at last, with here and there a punctuating cry of astonishment from Margaret ; and then the Fourth Form girl sank to the ground and buried her wet face in Deborah's blankets.

There was silence, unbroken till Deborah spoke in low tones, dazed by the confession of yet another night culprit, and yet relieved beyond measure at this explanation of conduct in Biddy which had appeared so hopelessly treacherous and bad.

" So *that* was why Biddy went ! " she said softly.

Biddy, alone in the sick bay, except for the visits of Miss Aster, lay in a kind of dream—a dream full of pain and wretchedness. The excitement of the night's happenings over, there was nothing to ward off any longer the realization of what now surrounded and awaited herself and her cherished chums. Disgrace—utter and terrible disgrace ! Hilda's prospects were ruined, her happiness destroyed : and Biddy's own kind motherly Auntie—how was she to face her with such a story of disobedience and defiance ? For there was no slightest doubt about it, she and the other discovered members of the Night Owls would be expelled.

Biddy's wretchedness would not have been lightened by a glimpse of Miss Demsford that day as she sat at her desk in the study and turned her gaze on the pale wan-faced head girl in the chair opposite.

"It's awful—*terrible*, Deborah!" she exclaimed. "Certainly they must all be expelled—every one of them! Night after night, slipping away like that—defiance—deceit—unparalleled! I know, my dear, how you must feel about it. The child Biddy probably saved your life, and I am told the other two children worked like Trojans to save you and Gwendolen. But courage cannot be allowed to excuse such utter defiance of school discipline!"

The pale girl opposite winced. "I know it's all true, Miss Demsford," she said; "but it isn't only that the girls, especially Biddy, have been so plucky. It is—is because I feel that it's been all *my* fault."

"Your fault, my dear!" echoed Miss Demsford. "Oh no, I cannot agree to that. You could not be everywhere. You had to leave things to your prefects, and I suppose poor Angela cannot help being a heavy sleeper."

"Oh, but I mean that deeper down it is my fault," persisted Deborah. "I made a mistake right at the beginning. The whole success of the self-government plan, which I had suggested myself—the whole thing hung on the right feeling being behind it. I gauged the Lower Fourth quite wrongly to begin with; I ought to have had more judgment. All the new conditions of this term—with such opportunities—were a great temptation. It was very much easier for the girls to break rules than in their old rooms, but I do not believe they would ever have done it if I had trusted them. It is a good proof, as I have told you, that they had solemnly agreed never to go to the cave again after being trusted with self-government—and Biddy would

not have gone that time if it had not been for the other child getting into disgrace. Oh, Miss Demsford, I just feel as though I can't *bear* it if those six girls are sent home in disgrace, with a blot over the rest of their school days, and I shall be always, *always* thinking it was my fault after all ! "

Deborah's voice broke and she bent her head down to hide her eyes. Miss Demsford cleared her throat. A pause ensued before she spoke gently.

" Deborah, I'll think it over, and to-morrow you shall know."

To-morrow came and Miss Demsford made her decision. By permission of the doctor, she asked that Rona, Hilda, Maxime, Grace and Hazel should be sent to the sick bay at once. Grace and Hazel had, of course, come forward to confess. Biddy, her cheeks flushed with suspense, was propped up on pillows, and the rest of the Night Owls stood round her bed.

" I am going to tell you," began the Head of Conellan, " what Deborah said to me yesterday." She told them exactly what had happened in the study. When she had finished, there were trembling lips and several hands searched furtively for handkerchiefs.

" That's the kind of head girl you have," said Miss Demsford. " She takes all your wilful disobedience and trouble upon her own shoulders. So for Deborah's sake I am going to give you all another chance. Now, are you going to try to play up and be worthy of the trust and faith of a girl like that ? "

The Night Owls had broken down utterly. Even

Grace and Rona were blinking ineffectually, and Maxime was silently crying into her handkerchief.

"Oh, Miss Demsford—we *will*! Oh, we will, honour bright!" The words were hardly distinguishable, but to the Head of Conellan they rang true.

"I give you five minutes with Biddy," she said; "and I must say here how grateful I am to the girls who acted so courageously over the robbery."

She left the room and the Night Owls tried to pull themselves together. "We m-mustn't make a fuss with Biddy ill!" murmured the struggling Maxime.

Biddy's face, however, was lit up with a flame of joy and a passionate devotion.

"Oh, girls!" she cried, carried away altogether from the Lower Fourth's usual fashion of sternly repressing emotion. "Oh, isn't Deborah *wonderful*? Wait till I get up—won't the Lower Fourth just show her!"

"Rather!" chorused the Night Owls. "We just will!"

The Lower Fourth *did* show her. Of course, there were penalties to suffer; and not the least was an unenforced one: the prefects were suffering from disillusionment, and though they supported Deborah loyally in giving scope to the Lower Fourth, they could not disguise their firm opinion that it was the most untrustworthy and troublesome form in the school. Nothing less than the new-found determination and penitence of the Lower Fourth could have kept it on its way. But it did try loyally to play up—and it succeeded. Hilda was not allowed to

try for the scholarship that term, but her father's good fortune enabled her to stay on at Conellan for that year, and next year she was the delighted winner.

Self-government was a tremendous success, and though the new dormitories were now finished, by universal request the Head Mistress agreed that camping out should be the rule again in the next summer.

The day when Biddy discarded her head-bandage and was able to use her arm once more was a great one for the Lower Fourth. Quite a court was held in the sitting-room, and Maxime voiced the feeling of Four B whole-heartedly when she cried: "Oh, Biddy, it's simply *delicious* to have you again!"

"And so say all of us!" cried Rona. Hilda, Biddy's devoted follower, was smiling happily. Maxime seized Biddy's sound arm, and, Rona on the other side, the three tent-mates strolled down to the cricket field.

"There's Deborah!" exclaimed Maxime suddenly, and the three gazed wistfully and shyly as the head girl approached. To their surprise, she halted before them.

"Well, how's the arm, Biddy?" she said kindly. "Is it shakable yet?"

Biddy blushed. "It's quite all right, Deborah, thank you," she murmured.

"Well," Deborah went on, "I've said my say to Rona and Maxime for digging me out of the earth. Now, Biddy, I want to be the first to shake your plucky little hand." Gently she took the weak

hand, so different from its twin paw, brown and strong, in her own, and, as they shook, something definite and thrilling happened inside Biddy's constitution. It was a happy new leaf being ardently turned over.

THE END